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Feb. 1, 1893.

No. 473.

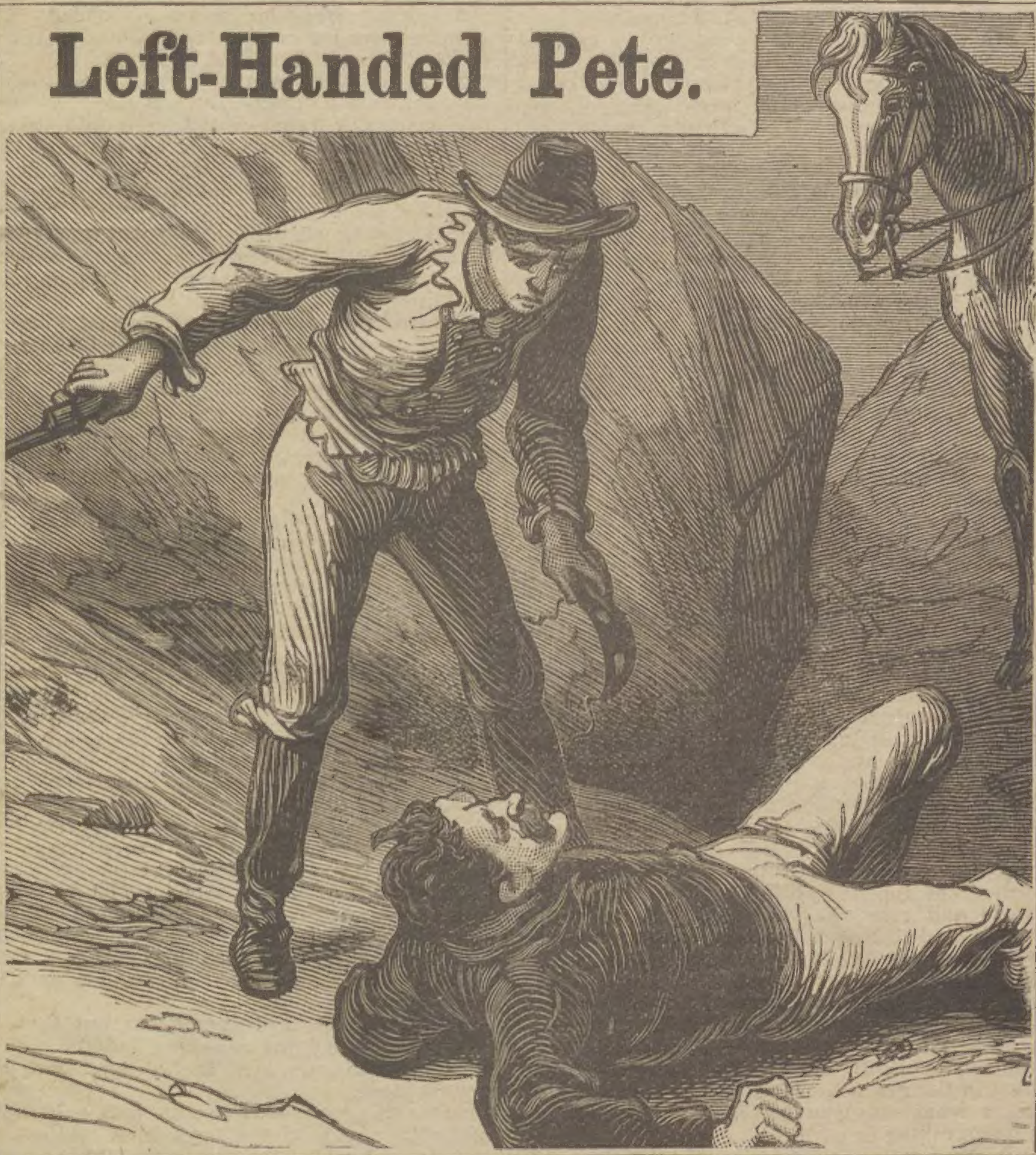
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a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST. NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

Vol. XXXVII.

Left-Handed Pete.



Left-Handed Pete, THE DOUBLE-KNIFE;

OR,

The Princess of the Everglades.

A Florida Romance.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE PRAIRIE RANCH," "ROVING JOE," "ROUND THE CAMP-FIRE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SURPRISERS SURPRISED.

As with one accord the party halted and inclined their heads in acute attention, with hands tightening upon their weapons. The eyes of all were directed toward the same point, where, through a narrow fringe of trees and undergrowth, gleamed the clear waters of Lake Pithlachocco.

Significant sounds had broken the noonday stillness of the forest. The sharp report of a rifle—a shrill, horrible shriek as of some being in mortal agony—a hoarser shout; these were the mingled sounds that arrested the silent, deliberate march of the volunteers, that they now listened to, with the hot blood quickening its flow in every vein, with the fire of war kindling in every eye.

A few moments later and the heavy tread of human feet is heard approaching, a loud, clumsy crashing through the rank weeds and shrubbery. The leader of the party raises his short rifle. His men promptly imitate the action; but no one fires. The human figure that bursts into view is one immediately recognized, known to all, beloved by many.

"Rattling Harry," a scout second to none in the Colonies. But his race is well-nigh run now. An arrow transfixes his face from cheek to cheek. Upon one side shows the neatly-trimmed feather, upon the other the blood-dripping barb. Two other shafts quiver deep in his left side. It is a miracle that the man keeps his feet, for death has claimed its own. Yet Rattling Harry makes his report. Reeling before the leader of the party, he splutters, despite the arrow:

"Injuns—gobs—comin'—!"

With the words, Rattling Harry fell forward at the feet of his officer, a burst of blood from his lips staining the sward. His duties performed, he died.

As Colonel Newman's lips parted to utter an order, the forest was filled with shrill yells, hoots and cries that effectually drowned his words, and the earth fairly seemed to shake as the enemy obeyed the thrilling, charging cry. Fortunately, the white men were, as a general thing, veterans, men who had more than once fought the wily red-man after his own fashion, who had, for years, lived in an atmosphere of continual alarm and danger, carrying their lives in their hands, as it were. Thus each man knew what was the best course, and lost no time in taking it.

A single instant—the yells and cries were still ringing through the air—and not a white man

was to be seen, save the motionless corse of Rattling Harry. But from the grass, the weeds, the small clumps of shrubbery, from behind the trunks of the scattered trees, and from behind the few hummocks, protruded the dark muzzles of rifles and muskets.

Like an avalanche the enemy leaped through the fringe of heavier timber into the open space of ground. For one moment they paused, appearing surprised and bewildered. Then their leader—who bestrode a noble white charger—uttered a single yell. It meant, seek cover.

But before it could be obeyed—almost before the signal passed his full lips—a tall form uprose from the grass with leveled rifle, crying, as his weapon spoke:

"FIRE!"

A rattling, irregular volley responded. The ground seemed to vomit forth a hail-storm of bullets through a veil of fleecy smoke. The front ranks of the savages melted away before the fiery breath; the ground was piled high with the dead and dying—death-yells and groans filled the air, adding to the terrible din and confusion.

The volunteers were not men given to idly wasting their ammunition. At their leader's bold example, they selected their target and brought it to the ground with the cool celerity they might have displayed in dropping the bounding deer or snarling panther.

With pan-aramic swiftness change followed change. When the smoke gradually lifted, none but the dead or disabled enemy were visible. The survivors had retreated.

With exultant shouts and cheers, the volunteers rose from their cover, intoxicated with their easy victory, forgetting all caution. But they were speedily awakened to a sense of their folly.

A scattering fusillade broke from the fringe of trees. A few arrows came hurtling over the undergrowth. Two men sunk to the ground, writhing in death-agony; several others winced under the pain of flesh-wounds.

"Let the scouts advance and dislodge the rascals!" cried Colonel Newman.

The orders were promptly obeyed. Following the Indian fashion of "charging," stealing from one cover to another, keeping their bodies well shielded, the scouts gained the point from whence the avenging missiles had been sped. They met with no resistance. The enemy had retreated.

Yet the air was filled with peculiar, tremulous cries and sounds. The savages were signaling to each other. That did not look like an utterly-defeated foe. They seemed to be gathering again, preparing for another and more decisive advance.

"The forest is alive with the heathen!" muttered a young man crouching beside an odd-looking genius.

"Thar's more'n a plenty of 'em, but then, as we sot out to look for red-skins, I don't reckon we'd ought to grum'le at findin' 'em," was the dry response.

"One thing sure—we've run into a hornet's nest. Do you hold the boys here, while I go and report," added the young captain of scouts.

Colonel Newman was a prudent, far-seeing

commander though brave as the bravest when only his own life was concerned. He knew that there was only one interpretation to be placed upon those signals.

"That man upon the white horse was King Payne himself," the officer thoughtfully said. "And even if not, this affair puts an end to all thoughts of surprising the town. They could easily hear our volley at Cuscowilla."

"Then you think—?"

"That the affair must be ended here, or near at hand. I believe that King Payne, as the heathen styles himself, is out with his entire force, and if so, to either advance or retreat would be ruinous. From the swamps and thickets, they could cut us up in detail. But, here, strong as they may be, we can teach the heathen a wholesome lesson. Eh, my brave men?"

A loud cheer replied. Evidently Colonel Newman possessed the confidence and respect of his men in no common degree. There was not a dissenting voice raised. Though the young captain of scouts doubted the propriety of such a step, he did not venture to signify as much.

Falling back a few hundred yards, to a point where the enemy must fully expose themselves in order to get within range, Colonel Newman set his men to work throwing up a breastwork of earth and brush. Meanwhile the scouts were not unemployed. Gradually they were forced back, to escape a collision with the enemy, as the great object was now to delay an attack until the breastwork should be finished.

At this point a brief glance at the reasons for this bold venture into the very heart of the enemy's country, is necessary. The "situation" in Florida at that time was rather complicated. The Fernandina affair had been "compromised," when the Spanish Governor of St. Augustine blew the smoldering spark into flame. A detachment of United States troops, composed mainly of invalids, under command of Lieutenant Williams, with a train of army wagons, was attacked at Twelve Mile Swamp by a negro known as Black Prince, sent out by Governor Estrada. Fired upon from ambush, Lieutenant Williams fell mortally wounded, together with seven of his men. A charge was made, and the negroes fled.

The American Governor, Mitchell, immediately called for reinforcements to attack St. Augustine, but Congress, opposed to further hostilities with Spain, while so fully occupied with England, made arrangements to withdraw all troops from Florida. In the mean time, the Indians, under King Payne and Billy Bowlegs had begun a predatory warfare upon the settlements, burning houses, stealing live stock and negroes—the latter, in many cases, joining their captors in further raids upon their late masters, and proving the worst of foes—and preparing to extend their incursion into Georgia.

It was determined to make an effort to disperse the Indians, if possible, before they collected in sufficient numbers to become formidable. Colonel Newman, of Georgia, the Inspector-General of that State, volunteered to lead a party against King Payne's town, Cuscorrilla, near Lake Pithlachocco. With only one hundred and ten men he undertook to penetrate

the enemy's country, over one hundred miles, and attack two formidable chiefs, surrounded by their warriors, and with every advantage of position and thorough knowledge of the country. Hoping to surprise Cuscorrilla, he passed on with the greatest speed consistent with prudence and secrecy.

But King Payne scented his coming, and prepared to surprise the surpriser, forming an ambush where the narrow trail wound through an almost impenetrable swamp, knowing that by no other route could the volunteers reach Cuscorrilla. Only for the watchfulness of skillful Harry Denning, the ambush would have been successful. As Rattling Harry gave the alarm, a cloud of arrows was dispatched at him, but, though mortally wounded, he managed to run back for half a mile, and give the alarm to his comrades. Then came the charge of King Payne—the ambushed volley—the retreat. Yet, in that brief interval, the scouts learned that, at least, two hundred Indian braves confronted them, and an attempt to traverse the swamp under these circumstances, could result only in defeat and extermination.

Harry Vories, the young captain of scouts, scattered his men through the interval, wherever the best cover was afforded, with orders to fire on every savage seen, and to hold their ground until absolutely forced back upon the main body. His own position was one of the most advanced, and beside him crouched Peter Hoffman, or Left-Handed Pete, by which *nom de nique* the worthy scout was known far and wide.

These two men, so dissimilar in appearance, were inseparable. From boyhood they had been playmates, had fought for and with each other, had gained their wood-lore, had hunted the bear and panther through the cane-brakes and forests, had trailed the wily Indian, had fought and conquered him; and with each adventure, each day, the love that bound the comrades together, grew stronger and more firm; they were brothers, rather than mere friends.

Harry Vories was the sole surviving son of Colonel Vories, of Revolutionary fame. The veteran was then in the field against the British. He had wished Harry to serve with him, but the wild, free life so long led by the youth, unsuited him for the rigid regulation life, and when the Florida expedition was broached, he eagerly accepted the position as chief of scouts, little dreaming of the perils and privations in store for him.

Of course Left-Handed Pete accompanied Vories. Pete was a peculiar genius, doing more things in exactly the contrary way from that which others would take, which, quite as much as his ambi-dexterity, gained for him his *sobriquet*. Pete was tall, gaunt, but muscular; a synonym for bodily strength, activity, woodcraft, and skill in the use of weapons. Actually knowing no fear, where only his own welfare was concerned, he possessed a fund of impudent assurance that often served him in a tight place, from which courage alone could scarce have extricated him.

"Unless the boys work lively they'll sca'cely hev time to fix that breastwork to the old man's likin'." said Left-Handed Pete to Harry Vories,

coolly glancing at his priming as he cocked his rifle.

"I don't like this sudden silence. It smells of mischief. And look! see yonder smoke!" said Vories, pointing to where a dense column of black vapor steadily rose above the treetops.

"Keep your fingers down—you'll spile the fun. There's a skelp out yender, itchin' to be lifted. I reckon the varmint don't know Left-Handed Pete's here," grimly muttered the long scout, his black eyes glowing vividly.

"I see—the bunch of grass yonder," whispered Harry.

"Jest so. You see the dead brier thar? When the varmint reaches that, he's my meat. You keep a lookout fer other game—this 'ne's mine."

The keen eye of the scout had detected an almost imperceptible movement amid the living green, and now knew that an enemy was stealthily advancing, with a bunch of grass bound around his head, in an upright position. Though nothing else could be seen, Pete knew where the supporting body should be, and felt no doubt of his ability to plant a rifle bullet between the red-skin's eyes. And as the bunch of grass gradually neared the dead brier, the muzzle of his rifle was raised.

Sharp and clear the report rung out, and a dusky, half-nude, paint-bedaubed form sprang erect, tossing the blood-stained fillet from its brow, a wild, unearthly yell of death-agony rending the air. As though this shriek was the long-awaited-for signal, the thrilling war-cry of the Seminoles burst forth, and the shadowy aisles of the forest seemed alive with blood-thirsty fiends as the red-skins charged with brandished weapons.

"Steady, lads—make every shot tell!" cried Vories, as one of the leading braves fell before his unerring rifle.

Led by the same tall figure upon the white horse, the savages charged boldly, desperately, almost up to the hastily constructed breastwork, driving the scouts before them. But then, as the voice of Colonel Newman gave the command to fire, the savages reeled and faltered. A storm of death tore through their ranks. The rider of the white horse went down. His braves yelled with dismay. The whites, seeing their advantage, leaped over the frail breastwork, and charged in turn. The Seminoles did not await the collision, but turned and fled.

A tall form sprang up from the heap of dead, and buried a tomahawk to the eye in the scout's brain; then with a wild, peculiar yell, sprang after the fugitives.

It was King Payne, who had just extricated himself from the body of his fallen horse. That alone had caused his fall. Not a bullet had touched his person.

At his cry the Seminoles rallied for a moment. The forces met with a clash; a few hasty blows from either side, and then the red-skins turned and fled, pursued by the exultant volunteers. It was now a hot race; their fire-arms all empty, the whites strove to overtake the Indians, and bring their side-arms into play, but the light-footed warriors easily maintained their lead.

Again King Payne raised his voice as his

braves plunged into the dense swamp, but this time its purport was very different. The savages fled no further. They turned and boldly faced the foe, plying their bows until the air was fairly alive with the feathered shafts. One by one the volunteers fell, until, their ardor cooled, they bethought themselves of cover. Reloading their rifles, they fired at every glimpse of a foeman, but with the utmost care, the Seminoles were having the best of it.

Suddenly an alarming cry arose from the rear. A man fell, wounded in the back by an arrow. A moment's thought revealed the truth, and showed their danger in its fullest extent. The retreat had been but a ruse on the part of the enemy to draw them into a trap. While chasing the party under King Payne, Billy Bowlegs had led a second band around, to gain their rear and take possession of the breastwork.

"Follow me, my lads!" cried Newman, his eyes flashing. "We must regain the breastwork at all hazards!"

In stern silence the volunteers obeyed, following close in their brave leader's footsteps. On through the undergrowth they charged, with an irresistible nerve.

A few Indian scouts darted lightly aside, discharging an arrow or two as they disappeared. Then a score of black forms rose from the grass, delivering a volley from their rifles and muskets. A brief scuffle; then over the negroes the white men dashed, on to meet the strongest force, held in reserve at the breastwork. Close in their rear yelled the Seminoles under King Payne. Their arrows hurtled through the air, slaying and wounding.

The bandy-legged chief leaped upon the breastwork, and uttered his wild war-cry. At the signal his braves fired. Near a dozen of the white men fell, dead or dying, but the survivors did not falter. With dauntless courage the breastwork was carried, and the bayonets of the marines brought into full play. A few moments of this hot work was enough for the Seminoles, and despite the yells and curses of rage that flowed from the foam-tinged lips of Bowlegs, they turned and fled. The party of King Payne caught the infection, and even in the moment of victory, the Seminoles accepted defeat, and fleeing, left the decimated band in undisputed possession of the works. It was a joyful surprise, for they had believed destruction inevitable, and their rejoicings were great.

Yet this feeling soon toned down to one of stern gloom, as they realized this lesson. Another such victory would be equivalent to a defeat. And that the enemy would again advance not one doubted for a moment. They had been strongly reinforced. Their smoke-signal still showed above the forest, summoning their allies to the spot. The result seemed only a question of time.

As the shades of night settled over the earth, Newman dispatched two trusty men in quest of aid. Left-Handed Pete was one. Harry Vories volunteered, but was refused. So many of the officers had fallen, that he was needed.

The night passed without any regular assault, though numerous shots were exchanged. The Seminoles were evidently awaiting reinforce-

ments, or had resolved to starve the volunteers out.

By noon of the next day Newman had resolved to attempt a retreat. His men were suffering extremely from thirst and hunger. They said, better die in battle than lying in a ditch to die like dogs.

Sullenly they retired, grimly defiant, hurling back the exultant foe that hovered upon their rear and flank, sweeping those from their paths like chaff. It was one long skirmish, fearfully trying to the patience and courage. With difficulty they refrained from recklessly charging their insolent foes, though knowing that such a course would be little short of suicide. This compact body once broken, the Seminoles would find them an easy prey.

But this is not a history of that disastrous march. Though a volume might be written of the many daring deeds and desperate actions of that brave band, a brief *resume* is all that this story demands.

At nightfall they chose a position, and went into camp, resting upon their arms. As before, skirmishing kept them from much-needed slumber. With day-dawn, they once more started upon the retreat. At noon an ambush was sprung. After the first volley, the enemy charged, led by a giant negro and a white man. These two men singled out Harry Vories, and, after a stout resistance, felled him to the ground, senseless. Then a cry from Black Prince called off his men.

Colonel Newman resolved to retreat no more, and at nightfall began throwing up fortifications. For five more days they remained here, keeping the Indians at bay, subsisting upon two alligators that the scouts shot in the adjacent swamp.

The savages made one more desperate attack, but were repulsed, though, had they not delayed so long, they must have been successful. But they knew now that aid was close at hand, and their ranks had been so thinned, that they feared to remain longer. The retreat was sounded, and the volunteers left to themselves.

An hour later Left-Handed Pete came in with reinforcements. The remnant of the surprising party was saved.

CHAPTER II.

THE JAWS OF DEATH.

WHEN Left-Handed Pete learned what had happened to Harry Vories, he staggered back and sunk to the ground, like a man who had received his death-wound. In that moment, if never before, he learned the depth and strength of the love that had bound their hearts together.

But the bold scout was not one to remain prostrated. Arising, he carefully stowed away his rations, replenished his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, as though preparing for a long and dangerous expedition. Colonel Newman, who had been closely watching him, now spoke:

"There is no hurry, Pete; we will not march for an hour yet."

"But I be. I'm goin' to look a'ter pore Harry."

"He is dead; you can do him no good, and

will only lose your own life. Besides, we need you here."

"My life ain't wuth no gre't, I don't reckon, but them as takes it must pay my price. Thar's enough here to guide you safe back to the settlements. Anyhow, I'm goin'."

"You are subject to my orders. If I command you to stay, you must obey," sharply added Newman.

"Look here, Colonel Newman, you're a man, an' I like you, but jest as sure as you give orders to the boys to stop me in this, or hinder me in any way, jest so soon I'll kill you. Thar you hev it right out. I'm goin' to find Harry, or what thar is left of 'im, or go under in the try-in'." quietly said Left-Handed Pete, cocking his rifle, and holding it ready in the hollow of his left arm.

Colonel Newman saw that the scout meant every word he said, and knew that only a tragedy could result from an attempt to restrain Pete. And then as scout of a volunteer party, Hoffman was not amenable to strict military discipline. The result was that Left-Handed Pete bade his comrades a good-by, and struck out along the blood-stained back trail.

Left-Handed Pete was no fool, and he did not expect to find his comrade alive. He believed that, at most, he would find his mangled corpse. Still, it would be some consolation to know that a friendly hand had given the remains burial. And after that—the contracted brow from beneath which the black eyes glittered into a deadly fire, the tight grip upon his rifle, told plainly what would follow. Harry should be avenged.

Left-Handed Pete found that little could be accomplished on the remnant of that day. The Seminoles had scattered through the forest and swamps, their vengeance still unappeased, though they feared to attack the reinforced pale-faces. Hovering around, like the vultures of the battle field, they watched greedily for an opportunity to pick up a straggler or two. To elude them Pete was forced to bury himself deep in the swamp, surrounded by scarcely less deadly enemies—the alligator, the rattlesnake, moccasin and copperhead snakes.

Still, in his impatience, he forced his way onward, regardless of the risk he ran, eager to reach the spot where Harry Vories had been lost sight of. Twice during the night he came into collision with Seminoles, both times avoiding a struggle by burying himself in the mud and water, and imitating the snort of the alligator or terrapin. Steadily keeping the one object in view, he choked down the feeling of vengeance that urged him to spring upon these enemies to slay them, to drink their blood.

The light of dawn slowly rifted through the dense foliage, and Left-Handed Pete advanced with more confidence. He placed just reliance in his own skill and woodcraft. Though the forest and swamp might be swarming with bloodthirsty enemies, he felt capable of treading the tangled trail in safety. His progress indicated a skill that Leatherstocking might well have been proud of. The shadowy recesses seemed fairly alive with savages. At times he could hear the tremulous notes as two parties

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signaled each other, and crouching low down in the swamp mire, or beneath some dense mass of foliage, could hear the rapid splashing or elastic tramp as the dusky warriors filed past, sometimes fairly beneath his eyes. Around him rose their columns of black smoke, rapidly changing their position and combinations: the secret telegraph of the Seminoles. Pete read their general meaning correctly. He knew that King Payne and Billy Bowlegs were gathering their clans for one more blow at the pale-faced invader. And, though there could be little doubt of the ultimate result, Pete was glad, for this would give him a comparatively clear trail, and before the Seminoles should return, it was likely that his purpose would be accomplished.

This was his only thought—the only object he had in view now; to know the fate of his brother in heart, and he only gave a passing thought to the peril of his late comrades.

At noontime Left-Handed Pete gained the spot where Black Prince had ambushed the volunteers. A rapid but thorough reconnoissance of the spot assured him that the vicinity was free of living enemies; then he advanced.

A few vultures and buzzards flapped heavily away, sailing round his head in lazy circles, or else perching upon the neighboring deadwoods. Despite his proved courage and iron nerves, Left-Handed Pete felt his flesh creep and his bronzed cheek turned pale, as his glance took in the sickening scene. The ground was thickly strewn with blood-stained rags and bones. Ghastly, grinning skulls lay half-hidden in the discolored grass, leering at him through their eyeless sockets, frowning upon him with their tooth-scarred foreheads. A sickening stench filled the air. The feathered scavengers flapped their wings heavily as they circled above the intruder, their naked necks and bloodshot eyes bending downward as though greedily speculating upon the chances of this man's forming the dessert to their toothsome feast.

With a swelling in his throat, Left-Handed Pete turned and staggered away. A blood-red veil seemed passing before his eyes. He felt deathly ill, and when the cool, green foliage shut out the horrible spectacle, the scout sunk heavily to the ground, weak and helpless as a child.

"My God!" he gasped, hoarsely, "an' sech as *that* is all that's left o' him! Harry, my pore brother!"

For he believed that among this ghastly debris lay all that remained upon earth of his comrade. The skull that had seemed to grin mockingly at him from its grassy nest, the dismembered bones that lay scattered here and there, the blood-stained rags—he shuddered anew, and bowing his face to the cool, moist ground, groaned aloud with the terrible agony of a strong man's bleeding heart.

But this lasted only for a few moments. Then he lifted his head with an impatient shake, dashing a hand across the bloodshot eyes, a bitter sneer curling the white lips as they parted in a harsh, unnatural laugh.

"Pete Hoffman, be you a fool as well as a babby! It's *you* blubberin' like a love-sick gal! Wake up, man—wake up an' git to work. *Work*

—thar's a-plenty of it fer you to do! Thar's Harry a-tellin' of you what to do—he sais *revenge!* An' here's what'll hev it. I'll drink blood ontel I'm dead drunk. While I kin draw a bead or play a knife, I'll death-trail these Seminoles. Ontil they kill me, I'll kill them. Night an' day, I'll— Hist!"

Abruptly ceasing his wild mutterings, Left-Handed Pete prostrated himself, one ear turned toward the Glade of Death, his eyes glowing vividly, his hot breath hissing between his close-clinched teeth as his fingers closed upon his rifle-barrel as though they would bury themselves in the bronzed iron.

A human voice came to his ear, clear and mellow, ringing. The words were rude and uncouth; the pronunciation unmistakably that of a negro. From the swamp surrounded glade came the sounds.

With the celerity and noiseless progress of a serpent, Left-Handed Pete glided forward upon his belly, until, pausing beneath a shrub, he peered out upon the glade. The huge, almost gigantic, form of a negro, black as jet, met his gaze. He was idly strolling around, poking at the fleshless skulls and bones with the muzzle of a long, rusty musket, or kicking them aside with his flat, broganed feet, crooning forth his rude rhymes, probably extempore, since it narrated the ambush of Black Prince and his men.

Had the actions of the negro left any room for doubt, it would have been dispelled by the objects that dangled upon the broad, woolly chest, suspended around the black's neck by a string. A single glance showed Left-Handed Pete that there were three scalps—the hair of white men—no doubt torn from the heads of his late comrades since they were still fresh and gory.

Quick as thought the scout's rifle sprung to his shoulder, and the silver bead covered the negro's forehead. But even as his finger touched the trigger, Left-Handed Pete hesitated, finally lowering the weapon. A kind of instinct seemed to warn him that a shot fired in that place might be fatal to himself as well. The negro did not act like one who was alone, but rather with the careless confidence of one who knows that a single cry from his lips will bring ample aid to overcome any threatening danger.

"But you don't git off so easy, nigger," muttered Left-Handed Pete, uncocking his rifle and laying it aside. "The knife must do the work—I reckon you won't hev time to squeel a'ter I lend you a dig."

Left-Handed Pete watched his chance, patiently. The negro strolled aimlessly around, adding to his string of doggerel, evidently hugely tickled with his composition. Perhaps he was the Orpheus of some dusky troop, and like many another wit, believed in privately rehearsing the extemporaneous effusions with which appreciative friends are to be electrified.

Gathering himself up, Left-Handed Pete leaped forward like a panther, a long knife flashing in the sun's rays for an instant before it sunk to the very hilt just above the collar-bone of the negro. The next instant both the scout's hands were closed upon the brawny throat, but this act was useless. The long blade

had penetrated the heart, and death was instantaneous, and the epic of Black Prince's ambush was never completed.

Removing the scalps, Left-Handed Pete thrust them into his bosom, and then lifting the huge carcass, he bore it to the swamp, and there stood upon it until the soft, clinging mud covered it forever.

"Thar's the fu'st count, but 'twon't be the last by many a one. All the black an' red imps atween this an' never-come-back ag'in wouldn't pay for your skelp, Harry," muttered Left-Handed Pete, regaining his rifle. "Now to see whether the varmint had any fri'nds nigh, or not."

Hoffman cautiously followed the plainly-imprinted trail left by the black, keeping a keen lookout ahead. He had not advanced a quarter of a mile before he scented the odor of roasting meat, and caught sight of a fleecy vapor rising above the hill-tops, that he knew was smoke. The fire deepened in his eyes, and he advanced with the stealthy caution of a panther creeping upon its unsuspecting prey. Truly, these last few hours had greatly altered the usually gay, light-hearted scout.

"Thar's more o' the imps, and I kin git another lick for Harry—mebbe I kin git back his skelp, too," muttered Left-Handed Pete, beneath his breath.

Five minutes later, he parted the dense foliage of a clump of bushes and peered out upon the scene. A small camp-fire was built in a beautiful glade inclosed upon all sides by the thick-growing trees and shrubbery. The ground was a little higher than the general level, and was thus dry and comfortable, thickly carpeted with grass and moss.

Over a score of men were visible, idly lounging upon the ground and around the camp-fire. The majority of these were negroes, half-nude, in many cases painted fantastically, and dyed feathers stuck in their wool. Lying upon the ground, leaning against the trees, or dangling from some pendent bough was a great profusion of weapons. This carelessness told how secure the party felt, how little they feared being surprised by an enemy.

The scout knew that he was watching the very party that had ambushed the retreating volunteers, for he could distinguish the still fresh scalps that had been torn from the skulls of the fallen soldiers. But he had scarcely noted this fact, when he sunk back, ghostly-pale, gasping for breath.

He had caught sight of a human form lying at the root of a tree, apparently tightly bound to its trunk. Though the face was hidden from his view, Left-Handed Pete saw that the garb was that of a white man, and something in the partly-revealed form reminded him of Harry Vories.

"It's impossible—it can't be him, for he's rubbed out," breathed Hoffman, choking down his emotion. "But I'm goin' to see who it is, anyhow!"

In a very short time, Left-Handed Pete gained a point from whence he could make out the features of the captive. Again the fit of faintness seized him. He half-believed himself gazing upon a ghost—the spirit of the dead.

For before him was the brother he had so bitterly mourned, seemingly alive and well, though a bound captive. Pete rubbed his eyes again and again, fearing to believe his senses, for he had abandoned all hope of ever meeting Harry Vories in the flesh, firmly believing him dead.

Yet the seeming miracle had a very simple explanation. Though unaware of the fact, Harry Vories had a deadly, inveterate enemy, who had vowed his destruction. That foe had directed the ambush, had eyes only for the young leader of scouts. His hand it was that felled Vories bleeding to the ground, and then called off the attacking negroes, carrying the senseless man off the ground, plunging deep into the swamp. That accomplished, he felt no further interest in the fate of the volunteers, but he dared not disobey when King Payne ordered him to lead on his men. Leaving the captive in charge of two trusty negroes, he joined the Seminole chief. When the savages disappeared before the rescuing party of whites, he stole away with his band, and returned to where his prize was hidden. Thus it was that Left-Handed Pete found them so near the spot where Vories had fallen.

"I'll give him a idee who's around, anyhow," muttered Pete, as soon as he had in a measure conquered his surprise. "Then he'll be on the lookout fer me."

With ventriloquial skill he uttered the plaintive note of the cat-bird, three times repeated, closely followed by the peculiar croaking of the rain-crow. Vories slightly moved his head and glanced swiftly around. It did not seem possible that aid could be near, yet the signal so often made use of between the brother scouts in times of danger sounded in his ear. It was this memory that roused Vories from his painful musings.

A man, gray-haired, evidently past the prime of life, glanced toward the captive, and with a foul oath demanded what was the matter, adding a threat. Vories made no reply, for the signal again broke the air, and renewed hope sprung up in his breast. Surely, this could be no mere coincidence; the three calls of the cat-bird, followed by the harsher notes of the rain-crow. Yet he was the only one who noticed the fact, for both birds are plentiful in that section.

Gathering confidence from his immunity thus far, Pete cautiously began circling the glade, crawling close to where Harry Vories was confined. He feared to lose any more time than was absolutely necessary, lest his trail should be discovered when the slain negro was missed, and search made for him.

A few minutes later, he was crouching close behind the huge tree at whose foot Vories was half-reclining. The dense foliage of the bushes concealed his movements from those within the glade. Once again Left-Handed Pete sent forth the well-known signal, and Vories now knew that his brother scout was at hand and working for his liberty. At any other time, he would have seen the folly of attempting an escape at that moment, but the subject of conversation between the white man and the giant negro, Black Prince, drove all thoughts of prudence from his mind. A frightful danger was menac-

ing one whom he held even dearer than his own life, and could he escape, he might still be in time to avert it. With this hope, he gently breathed the words:

"If that is you, Pete, for God's sake, cut these cords!"

"What 're you grumblin' at now?" demanded the white man, glancing quickly around.

"These cords hurt me; come and loosen them—don't treat me like a dog," hastily replied Vories.

"You came of a dog's race, curse you! Then the treatment of sich is good a-plenty for you. But don't fret. We'll soon cure your hurts. I don't reckon you'll hev to complain much longer," was the significant answer.

Left-Handed Pete did not hesitate long, though perfectly realizing the risk he ran. Stealthily he parted the bushes and thrust forward his knife. Its keen edge touched the thongs that bound Vories, and they parted with a twang, so tightly had they been drawn.

The sound met the ears of the white man, and again he glanced around. He caught a glimpse of the bright knife-blade as Hoffman's hand was withdrawn, and uttering an angry yell, leaped to his feet.

Left-Handed Pete saw that to delay a moment would be fatal to him, and knowing that upon his retaining liberty rested the only chance of Harry's escape, he clutched his rifle and darted away at the top of his speed, and that was something marvelous, considering the nature of the ground. Lithe, active as a panther, the scout twisted around the trees and larger bushes, leaping over the slighter obstacles as though impelled by some complicated though perfect machinery. He fairly surpassed himself, for the stakes were more than his own life now; upon his escape depended the future of his heart-brother.

The surprise had been so complete that few of the pursuers had taken time to snatch up their weapons, though all were armed with knives at their waists. Of them all, two men rapidly distanced the rest, fairly holding their own with the nimble scout. But fortune favored Hoffman, in disabling by an accident his most dangerous enemy. Stumbling, the white man fell heavily against a tree, lying at its base, senseless. Undaunted, the other, a tall, lithe negro, sped on.

For a full mile they ran thus, scarce twenty yards separating them, nor could either gain a yard but that, the next moment, it was snatched back again. Hoffman dropped his rifle at the foot of a huge deadwood, and then ran on, believing that the entire party were close upon his trail. Otherwise he would have turned, and trusted the chances of a hand-to-hand struggle with the black.

Suddenly the race brought him upon the bank of a L., deep bayou. He dared not hesitate or turn aside, and Pete leaped far out into the stagnant pool. Close upon his heels the negro followed. At the double splash, a seeming log of deadwood that lay near the further shore, suddenly sprung into life and darted forward, a gigantic alligator.

Left-Handed Pete scarce realized his peril until the huge saurian was within its own length

or him, sweeping swiftly forward with distended jaws. Quick as thought, he dove beneath the surface, swimming low down, with all the skill he possessed.

When he arose he was nearly to the further shore. Glancing back, he saw the jaws of the alligator close upon the negro, who was down below the surface, struggling, shrieking horribly. It was a hair-breadth escape, and trembling in every limb, Peter crawled into the bushes. A moment later the negroes came up. The blood still tinged the water. They believed the scout had fallen a prey to the alligators, and returned to report as much.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF A DARKENED LIFE.

THE bold attempt to wrest his captive from him, seemed to fill the heart of the renegade with uneasiness, even after the negroes returned and reported the scout as dead. In the brief race before his accident the renegade had recognized the fugitive, though this was the first time they had ever come in personal contact. The fame of the young scout had spread far and wide, and he was represented as one of truly wonderful skill and adroitness in wood lore.

Though believing Left-Handed Pete to be really dead, for the negroes declared that they had seen the alligators draw him beneath the surface of the bayou, McGirth resolved to run no further chances, but make his way at once to the town of King Payne, Cuscorilla, where there could be no chance of his losing his captive. And as the moon arose, he broke camp, himself and three of the negroes taking charge of the prisoner, while Black Prince led the remainder upon a particular duty assigned him by McGirth.

The rangers roughly forced Vories along, his feet having been freed to enable him to walk. Close behind them strode McGirth, with watchful eye and ready weapons, his head bound up with a bloody bandage.

The village was reached in safety, and Vories was carefully confined in that portion of the town set apart for the negro partisans. Bound hand and foot, he lay in a dark, noisome log hut, a prey to gloomy forebodings and fears. He had heard of the death of Left-Handed Pete, and saw no reason to disbelieve it. And with that vanished his last hope. Then, too, he knew that a black peril threatened one very dear to his heart, while he lay there helpless, powerless to aid her.

And then, this strange enemy: who and what was he? In what manner had he gained his enmity?—an enmity so bitter that the renegade had sworn he was doomed to suffer death at the stake, after the most devilish tortures that savage ingenuity could devise. This man and he had never met before; of that he felt confident.

With such thoughts as these, Vories passed away the long, weary hours, until the clear light of day stole in through the cracks and crevices in the rude pole roof overhead, and the

voices and bustle without told him that the night was past.

The rude slab door was abruptly flung open, and a man entered, bearing a smoking steak upon a bark platter. It was the renegade, Daniel McGirth.

"You see we don't mean to starve you, young feller," quietly remarked McGirth, as he set down the food, and then cut the cords that bound the scout's hands. "I don't b'lieve in killin' a man on an empty stomach. Thar—you don't need your feet free to eat with; an' you're too peart a lad to run any risk with. Eat away now—what you waiting fer?"

"You say you are my enemy—that you hate me worse than poison, then why are you feeding me? Why don't you starve me, or kill me outright?" curiously asked Harry Vories.

"I've bin lookin' fer you to ax some sech questions, an' I kem here this mornin' to answer 'em, an' to tell you why I hate you. 'Tain't a long story in the tellin', though it's lasted thirty odd years—it begun afore you were born, youngster. But thar—eat your grub. I won't say nothin' more untel you do."

There was a peculiarly subdued air about the renegade that Vories had not noticed before. His bronzed features were hard set and unnaturally pale. A steely glitter filled his eyes. He spoke as though with an effort.

Yet Harry was half-famished, and did not hesitate long. Seizing the meat, he ate it ravenously, and then longed for more. But he did not ask for it. Something kept him from asking favors of this man.

McGirth filled a gourd half-full of water, and then dashed it plentifully with brandy. Again Vories hesitated, but an impatient gesture caused him to obey, and the vessel was emptied.

"Now, then, old man, for your story. I'll not thank you for this food and drink until I learn better your object in offering them," yawned Harry, feeling more like his usual self.

"You'd be a pesky fool ef you did," was the blunt reply. "Be sure I didn't do it as a favor, or from love fer you. I do it because I hate you like p'ison; I do it because I want you to keep up your stren'th, so you kin feel pain the sharper an' b'ar it longer. Ef you hadn't ett that quietly, I'd 'a' hed you held fast an' the grub stuffed down your throat. I'm goin' to feed you well an' nurse you up ontel you're all over that hurt, ontel you're strong and full of life. Then I'll kill you."

These last words were hissed through the tightly-clinched teeth with a fierce malignity that, despite his strong nerves, caused a peculiar thrill to creep over the prisoner's body. But he said, quietly:

"All right—thank you for nothing. I'll eat and drink and get back all my strength so I can foil your hatred. But you promised to tell me *why* you hate me so bitterly. I am curious to learn how I have wronged you."

"I'll tell you. Fu'st, think ef you hev ever heard your father speak of one Dan'el McGirth."

"Yes—I believe I have. He was a good scout once, before he deserted his colors and went over to the British and Indians, turning renegade. Are you that man?"

"Yes, I'm Dan'el McGirth. Mebbe the old man has told you the story, but if he did, no doubt he made himself out a saint an' me a devil. It's gen'ally the way with them who wrongs another. But never mind that now."

"You would not dare insult him if I were not bound. I'd tear your foul, lying tongue out by the roots," chafed Vories.

"I don't doubt you would try it, fer you're a man, I b'lieve. A pity you come of seech a race. But thar—I'll take a fresh start. As I said afore, my name is Dan'el McGirth. I was raised in Georgy. My folks was poor, but nobody could say a word ag'inst thar honesty an' goodness o' heart. I was well raised, though I didn't git much of any school-l'arnin', an' I was what is called a good boy. That is, I didn't lie nor steal nor get drunk with the niggers like many o' those called the better class did. I was free-spirited, would fight quick as wink ef I thought any one tried to putt upon me, was full o' fun an' devilment, but thar was nothin' downright wicked in me ontel Hugh Vories, your father, boy, putt it thar.

"Thar was a neighbor to us both, Widder Keeler. She had only one child, Susy, a black-eyed, rosy-lipped gal, purty as a pictur.' You're old a-plenty to know how sech things will go. I did what you would 'a' done in my place. I fell in love with Susy, an' she finally l'arned to keer fer me in the same way, as we both grew older. Your father—that is a fine-lookin' young man then, with oceans o' money, an' fine clothes, an' ridin' hosses an' sich like—he knowed Susy, an' tuck a kind o' fancy to her. He didn't think o' marryin' her, though. She was only one o' the poor whites, an' his folks war big bugs. They'd 'a' driv' her from thar kitchen like a nigger ef she'd 'a' come thar as *his* wife.

"Wal, time went on, an' the big fuss began with the red-coats. Everybody volunteered. I did, an' found myself in Hugh Vories' company o' Rangers. I didn't know him then or I'd 'a' cut my hand off afore I'd 'a' tuck orders from him. We did good service, was in a good many bad scrapes, an' as the captain was no coward, we got our name up. I was made the head scout; all the rest war under me. I b'lieve now that he hoped to git me killed off, so he'd hev a cl'ar field with Susy. But I didn't git a scratch, an' then it was that I gained the name o' bein' the best scout an' spy in the Southern Colonies. I don't say it by way o' braggin'; any o' the boys who fit then kin tell you the same.

"One day we had a brush with the red-coats, an' licked them. My horse was killed under me airly in the fight. I picked out the officer of the red-coats an' made fer him. I pulled him from his saddle and killed him, then took his critter fer the rest o' the muss. By all the laws of our troop the hoss was mine. I hed fa'rly airned it. But beca'se it was a choice piece o' hossflesh—or I thought that was his reason then—Hugh Vories ordered me to give it up to him. He said it was a 'ported Arab, an' only fit fer an officer. He ordered me, mind ye, afore the hull troop, sayin' it was too good fer me. Ef he'd axed me fer it, like a man, I'd 'a' bin glad to give it up, fer we all liked him then. But he ordered me—talked to me like I war a dog.

"I told him the hoss was mine, and I'd kee-

it. He drew his sword an' told me to stan' aside. I up an' knocks him down with my fist, and then broke his sword. He got up, white as a ghost, an' tells the boys to take me pris'ner. My scouts was out o' the way, an' I didn't stand no show. They tied me up hand an' foot.

"That night they had what they called a court-martial on me. They said the penalty o' strikin' an officer was death, but as I'd been sech a good scout, they'd put it down at floggin'. I didn't think they'd do it—whip a free white man like he was a hog-stealin' nigger. But they did do it—curse them! they did do it!"

Up to this point McGirth had spoken in a low, quiet tone, as though the subject was utterly without interest for him, as he crouched down upon the pile of dried grass, his eyes bent upon the ground. But now he sprung erect, his eyes glowing with an almost maniacal light, his harsh features strongly convulsed, every muscle of his compact frame quivering as though even yet the degrading touch of the lash burned his flesh.

In silence Harry listened, making no attempt to interrupt the story, though he had heard something of the matter before. He began now to understand the deadly hatred that the degraded scout bore him, because his veins flowed with the blood of that man, his enemy.

"Yes, they flogged me," answered McGirth, choking down his emotion, though the blazing eyes were riveted firmly upon the face of his captive. "The shame of it, more than the pain, took away my senses. They thought I was dyin'. The surgeon 'tended to me, and said I would live. I did live for *revenge*!"

"That night I stole out from the place they put me, and entered the brush but where he slept. I drove my knife to the han'le in his breast. He giv' a yell that roused the camp, an' I had to run for it, without givin' another blow, though I b'lieved he was dead. I knowed I'd hev to leave the country for good, then, but I couldn't go without tellin' Susy good-by. The boys tracked me thar. They didn't seem to remember what fri'nds them an' me had once't bin. They hunted me down like a runaway nigger. As I said, they were hot on my heels when I got to Widder Keeler's shanty. I heerd 'em comin'. I hed no we'pons, an' I couldn't fight. So I crept out the back way an' tuck to the woods. Ef I'd only 'a' knowed what was goin' to happen, I'd stayed thar an' giv' myself up to the boys. But how could I know? I thought they was men, not devils, worse than the Injuns that I've sence consorted with.

"They found my hat that I'd dropped. They b'lieved I was bein' hid by the women. Susy an' the old woman wouldn't tell the truth, for fear that I hadn't start enough. They wouldn't say yes er no. An' then—h—h! I'm a fool! That was years an' years ago—afore you was born, youngster, an' yit you see it chokes me an' puts somethin' in my eyes like dust. Why don't ye laugh? Laugh while ye git the chance, for 'tain't often that Dan'el McGirth shows himself a woman.

"But thar—I kin tell it in a word. They killed Susy. Mebbe they didn't mean it—mebbe he got mad and didn't know he hit so hard; but Mark Hamer killed her with his fist. Twenty

years ago I roasted him alive fer thet lick. Thar ain't one o' that gang left alive now. The old woman told me the names, an' I hunted 'em down one by one. That's the way Daniel McGirth pays his debts.

"But never mind. It brings up the devil in me to talk of that, an' I don't want to kill you yit awhile. I'll hurry over it as fast as I kin. I went an' jined the Tories. I couldn't face my old fri'nds with them lashes on my back, though you know now how well I deserved them. That lickin', and losin' Susy turned me all devil. I raised a band o' Tories an' Injuns, an' killed until I could count the skelps by dozens. It was long—not until after the war was over—that I l'arned your father was alive. I hunted him then, but he was gone. I couldn't git on his track. I didn't pick it up until two years ago. Then I found he was married and hed a fam'bly. Twice I could 'a' shot him down, but that wouldn't suit me. I meant to tear and squeeze his heart as he did mine. You say he didn't tell 'em to kill Susy. Ef he hadn't flogged me, Susy would be alive now; so he killed her. An' jest so sure he's got to pay for 't. Through you I'll strike him fu'st—then comes his turn.

"I kept close watch on you, doggin' you wherever you went, but I didn't see the chaine to git you in my hands until this trip. I showed you to my men, an' offered them big pay if they'd take you alive. That is all that saved your life, fer you was no coward, that I admit, an' resked your life like it wasn't no 'count. Wal, we did capter you, with on'y a liddle hurt. You've got to suffer as I did—and die a thousan' deaths in one. I'll keep 'count of it all, an' then send it to your father, so that he may know what to expect.

"You know whar I've sent Black Prince, the big nigger. He is to go to Forrester's plantation, whar your sweetheart lives. He is to capter an' fetch her here. I'm goin' to marry her, Injun fashion, in this 'ere shanty. We'll hev it lighted up in fine style. You'll be tied to yonder post, so you kin see every thin'. Then the next day we'll hev a stake planted out thar, right afore the door, an' thar you'll be tortured to death, while the purty Blanche sits in here by my side, a-admirin' of your courage, or else laughing at your squeels an' kickin's ef so be you turn coward as the flames begin to eat the flesh off o' your bones, an' the squaws try their devilmenta. Do you like the pictur'?" And McGirth sneered with diabolical malignancy.

Now, as before, Vories set his teeth hard to choke back the words that rose to his lips. He knew that they could produce no good effect, and would only gratify the renegade by revealing the sting left by his taunts. Twice he had tested the thongs that held his feet and legs firmly pinioned to the slab floor, but he could not rise to his feet. He was as helpless as though his hands were not free.

"After that, what then, mebbe you'd ax? Wal, I haven't it all planned out yit. But I've promised my dainty Blanche to Black Prince, after I git tired of her, if he does his part of the work well."

At this moment the door swung slowly open, and a light, graceful figure stood in the door.

way. McGirth glanced eagerly around, but as he recognized the intruder, the deep frown vanished, and a softer light came into his blood-shot eyes.

Vories also glanced in that direction. Despite his trouble, he was struck with wonder at the vision. A maiden stood there, young, yet perfectly formed, almost voluptuously so. The simple garb of softly tanned skins revealed every outline in its natural perfection undistorted by fashion's mold. Though an Indian, she was beautiful; a rarity, indeed.

In a soft, musical voice, she cried:

"The great chief has returned, and wishes to see Sure Eyes. He bade me say, be quick. He is very angry."

McGirth soon and quickly bound Vories's hands, and then left the hut. While he was thus occupied, the Indian maiden curiously watched Harry, and he even found that he detected a gleam of pity in her dark, soft eyes.

But as the door closed, and the heavy bars rattled upon the outside, Harry drooped his head and gave himself up to the gloomy forebodings that filled his heart. And truly he had enough to ponder upon.

CHAPTER IV.

BULLETS AND STEEL.

A HUGE, muscular black, with kinky, close-curved wool, a small, dull eye, whose face was peculiarly distorted by a saber or knife-cut that had carried away half of his nose and upper lip, thus laying bare the massive white, dog-like teeth; a negro nude from the waist upward, armed to the very teeth with weapons, the use of which he knew right well—such was Black Prince, Daniel McGirth's right-hand man.

With some five and twenty men, negroes, like himself, he lay resting upon an elbow, beside a tiny fire burning in a little glade. It was but little past noon. Their journey within a few miles of being accomplished, they had paused here for rest and food.

Black Prince, who was a despot in a small way when beyond the eye of McGirth, had not as yet deigned to inform his men of the object of this excursion. But now, as he puffed lazily at his blackened pipe, he vouchsafed:

"You lazy nigger debbils, open you' ears w'ile I talk. You want know what fo' we tek dis-a-her tramp? Shet up, you Coosaw Toby? Enty I know you don't know dat? De queschun was jest a preliberary splainification like, as ol' Marse used to say. But dar—now lis'en.

"Some o' you know de man dey call Judge Forrester, in Tapinola deestrick?"

"Enty I, dough?" interrupted a tall, lithe black, his eyes sparkling. "He bin my marse sence I 'tand knee-high to a woodchuck!"

"You too durned smart, Jelly Jim. You 'rupt de meetin' ag'in an' mebbe you git hurt—mind *dat*, now. But *dat's* de man I mean. Dar's whar we goin' now. Ain't goin' fo' niggers, dough, dis time. Bigger game—white folks; de young missus we gwine to kerry off. De boss sends us to git her fo' him. Don't know what fo'; but he say, 'Fotch her hyar, an' don't you hurt her neider, or I'll skin you 'live.' He'd do it, too, would Marse Dan'el. He bad man when he mad up. He say, 'Fotch her hyar. Do

what you like wid de rest. Kill 'em ef you like. Burn down de house, kill de niggers an' cattle an' hosses an' sich like, ef you want to; cut up de debil gin'ally, as much as you like, jist so you fotch *her* safe.' Dat's what he said—de boss. Dat's what we gwine fo' now. Enty we gwine to hab fun? De boss say fotch 'um young missus fo' him; Prince say he gwine to ketch yaller gal fo' *hese's*," and Black Prince laughed boisterously.

A chorus of shouts and expressions of pleasure greeted this speech, and it was evident that the expedition would not fail from lack of enthusiasm or interest in its success.

But there was one among their number who did not show any gratification; rather the very contrary. His face clouded and his eyes filled with an angry fire. It was the negro called Jelly Jim, who had claimed Judge Forrester for a master. Nearly a year before he had been stolen away by Black Prince and his gang during a foray. At first he had been sullen, but soon grew to accept the situation and to enjoy the free, lawless life. But now he remembered how kindly the planter had ever treated his slaves, and how the young mistress, Blanche, had sent him wine and jelly and choice bits of food from her own table when he lay so very ill. And then, too, he remembered a certain comely girl—a tall, straight mulatto, Abby—whom he had once hoped to make his wife. She was still dear to him, and with a lover's partiality, he believed that Black Prince's choice would fall upon her; for who among all the girls upon the estate could compare with Abby? Not one! And that thought turned the scale.

Stealthily, with the silent celerity of a serpent, Jelly Jim crept out of the glade unnoticed, and, when once beyond ear-shot, he darted away through the forest at breakneck speed. He resolved to save his young mistress and Abby, by betraying his late comrades.

It was fully an hour before his absence was noticed and commented upon. As if by instinct, the truth flashed upon Black Prince, and he leaped to his feet with a bitter oath.

"He's gone to tell his ol' marse dat we're com-in'! We mus' ketch him. Ef he gits dar fust, our game's sp'ilt. De fust ch'ice ob all de wenches to de one dat kills de cuss!"

Led by Black Prince, the negroes dashed forward through the tangled forest, straining every nerve to overtake or get ahead of the traitor, not knowing how great a start he had of them. Had he fallen into their hands at that moment, Jelly Jim would have fared but ill.

The vicinity of the plantation was reached without any such event, and Black Prince cursed bitterly as he was forced to believe that the runaway had beaten them in the race. Still, there was a chance that he might not, and the outlaw lost no time in idle delay, but led his men directly up to the plantation until the mansion was sighted.

Originally a large, one-story log-house, extensive additions had been made to it, from time to time, as occasion demanded, until now it presented quite an imposing appearance, though half-hidden amid the grove of trees. The building appeared deserted. Not a sign of human life could be seen. All was silent and still.

Black Prince ripped out a volley of sulphurous oaths, for he read this unusual quietude aright. He knew that Jelly Jim, the deserter, had beaten them in the race, and that the planter had prepared for their coming. If there had been time for Judge Forrester to gather in his slaves from their work upon the plantation, the expedition would be a failure, for behind such breastworks as the building afforded, the blacks would fight well.

Black Prince had picked up a good many ideas from association with the Spanish garrison, and had a monkey-like love of imitation. Dispossessing one of his men of a shirt which had once been white, he tied it to the muzzle of his rifle and boldly advanced, waving the flag of truce before him. The next moment a loud voice from the building broke the silence:

"Halt! there—cross the patch before you, and I'll bore your skull with an ounce bullet! Who are you, and what do you wish?"

"A gemman don't shoot a flag ob truce," pompously retorted Black Prince; then adding, quickly: "Didn't dat Jelly Jim tell you who we was and what we wanted?"

"Never mind that; I ask *you* the question, and if you are wise you will answer it," continued the voice.

"All right; dat's easy tole. I's Gin'ral Prince—my army is hidden in de bresh dar. We come here on bizness. I reckon you'll fin' out what dat is soon enough, ef you don't open de do's peaceably and let us come in. Do dat, an' we won't hurt ye. But you act sassy, or shoot any o' my army, an' de debble 'll git you, suah!"

"Do your worst—but if, when I count ten, there is one of you in sight, the devil *will* get his due, as sure as there's virtue in a long barrel and double sights! If you want entrance, you must make it for yourself."

Though no coward, Black Prince did not relish the idea of standing there for a target, and hastily plunged into the shrubbery. Then the yells of the negro outlaws told the occupants of the building that their only hope lay in a stout defense. In victory alone lay safety. To be conquered now meant death.

Giving his men their instructions, Black Prince scattered them around the building, there being no lack of cover to conceal their movements and shield their bodies from the return fire of the besieged. In the hope of lessening the number of defenders, a constant, dropping fire was kept up, the bullets and buckshot crashing through the light-shuttered windows. Black Prince knew that there were no neighbors living within sound of the fire-arms, deadened as the reports were by the surrounding trees.

The day was fast waning, and he only waited for the shades of evening to fall before taking more decisive steps. Whatever else he might be, Prince was no coward.

The fusilade was promptly returned from the building, and was not entirely without effect. One negro was slain outright, while several others were more or less severely wounded, though only one was disabled. Neither did the besieged escape unscathed, for the negroes had taken a lesson from their savage allies in strategy, and while one fired at the windows, another held himself in readiness in case the defenders

should fire at the smoke puff. By this policy, several of the slaves were killed.

As the sun sunk behind the treetops, and the gloom grew deeper within the grove, Black Prince sounded the call for his men to assemble. The time was at hand for more decisive measures.

Selecting several of the best marksmen, he assigned them stations in the shrubbery that commanded all the windows in the front of the building. There they crouched down, clutching a loaded rifle, with others lying beside them in readiness for use. The attacking party retained only their knives and hatchets, with an occasional pistol.

When satisfied that every one fully comprehended the part they were to play, Black Prince took his station at the butt of a stout palmetto log that had been prepared for the purpose. At a signal the log was raised breast high, and the marksmen opened a rapid fire upon the windows.

With a wild yell of encouragement, Black Prince gave the word to charge, and the heavy square butt was pointed directly toward the front door. With a will the negroes charged, yelling, screeching, howling like demons.

Two shots came from the building, and one negro fell, writhing in the death-agony. But the others did not falter; on they dashed. The death was promptly avenged. A volley from the ambushed marksmen cleared the windows.

With all the force of two dozen stout arms, added to its own impetus, the battering-ram was hurled against the door. The building seemed to shake and quiver to its very foundations, so heavy was the shock. A sharp crackling sound followed, and several splinters fell to the floor of the veranda.

"Ag'in—once more!" yelled Black Prince, stepping back.

Again the heavy log was dashed against the splintering, shattered door. At the same moment a blaze of light shone through the cracks, and a volley of bullets tore their way through the crowd of negroes.

High above the reports rung the yells, cries and curses of pain. The battering-ram fell heavily to the floor, flattening the skull of a gasping, dying negro. Others lay around, dead or wounded.

"Once more—show them your metal, lads!" shouted a clear voice from the hall within. "You are fighting for your lives now—prove yourselves men, and we will whip the devils yet! Fire!"

Only one pistol-shot answered the order. Against his commands, the entire force of defenders had fired, excited by the assault, and now the weapons were empty. It was a fatal error. A second volley just at that moment would have cowed the negro outlaws. As it was, they had time to recover from the surprise.

"Gi' it to 'em, boys!" yelled Black Prince, drawing his hatchet, or rather half-ax, that hung at his girdle. "Now—all togedder, an' dey'se our meat!"

As the words passed his lips, the negro giant strode forward and buried his ax to its eye in the splintered wood. Taking courage from his

bold action, the surviving outlaws promptly followed the example. Eager to participate in the affray, the three workmen came dashing up. The heavy hatchet-strokes fell like hail, and the white splinters covered the veranda floor. In ten seconds a passage was effected.

Black Prince pressed through the aperture first, and was greeted with a pistol-shot. He staggered back, with an involuntary cry, sinking to one knee, the blood gushing from his face.

"Now charge them, lads!" shouted the voice of Judge Forrester, a noble-looking patriarch. "Their leader is down—charge!"

His long white hair shining through the smoke, he dashed forward, his rifle playing like a bolt of lightning; the next moment its brightness was dimmed with the heart's blood of a negro outlaw. Right nobly the slaves seconded him. Inspired with fresh spirit by his example, they buried themselves against the outlaws, cutting and slashing with corn knives and sickles, dealing stunning blows with clubbed rifles and muskets, or plying the deadlier knife. Hard pressed, the outlaws slowly gave way, the shattered door falling before them. Vic o'ry seemed with the defenders. Already the excitable slaves yelled with exultant triumph, as, though fighting desperately still, the outlaws retreated step by step across the veranda. They had missed the encouraging yell of their leader. They believed Black Prince was dead. Without him they were lost. He was the head that guided; they the arms that dealt the blows. With the head gone, the arms struck at random.

But then, just as the outlaws were on the point of breaking into full flight, a voice was heard, like the bellow of a wounded bull. Partly recovering his senses, Black Prince dashed the streaming blood from his eyes, and leaped to his feet, hatchet in hand.

Uttering a terrible roar of rage and anger as he saw his men being worsted, he leaped upon the slaves, burying the ax helve deep in a skull. Again and again the heavy weapon fell, and death followed each blow.

Judge Forrester turned upon this resurrected foe, and made a quick pass at his heart with the rapier. Black Prince seized the weapon with his naked hand, jerking it from the old man's grasp, at the same time swinging forward his hatchet.

A simple circumstance saved the planter's life. The powerful jerk that had wrenched the rapier from his grasp, dragged him forward almost breast to breast with Black Prince. The blood-stained blade passed over his head, the helve crashing down upon his skull. With a groan, the planter fell like one dead.

In the excitement Black Prince did not notice but that the weapon had fallen as he intended, and giving the fallen planter no further thought, dashed at the next foe. And again the murderous weapon claimed its victim. Again the terrible roar filled the building.

Knowing now that their leader was alive, the outlaws rallied and fought their way back to the house. The yells that inspired them, however, cowed the remaining slaves. They believed they were fighting something more than

mortal men. Their superstition was aroused. With one accord they dropped their weapons and fled wildly into the darkened rooms beyond.

All but one: Jelly Jim. He had noticed the fall of his master, and leaped to his side in the darkness, making a pass at Black Prince with his knife. The forward rush of the outlaw saved his life, for the blow missed its mark.

Jelly Jim caught up the senseless form of his master and retreated with it over the bodies of the dead and dying. He reached the inner door in advance of the slaves, and passed on through the room. He acted by instinct rather than reason. He had no plan in view. He did not attempt to leave the house, though, possibly, he might have escaped himself. In one corner of the room he stood above the senseless form of his master, knife in hand, as Black Prince dashed through the door.

"Who's dat ar'? Speak quick—'fore I kill ye," snarled the negro giant, pausing before the dimly outlined figure.

Jelly Jim made no reply in words, but crouching down like a panther preparing for its leap, he darted forward with outstretched knife, knowing that he must either conquer or die. Black Prince caught the gleam of the bared steel, and leaped aside, adroitly tripping the negro up as he passed by. Jelly Jim fell heavily to the floor, his knife-blade snapping in twain, its point buried in the floor. The outlaw bounded high in the air, alighting with terrible force on the man's head and neck. A sharp snap told that Jelly Jim's neck was broken.

Black Prince now remembered the prime object of this fray, and called aloud to the negroes, bidding them spare all the women they found in the house. It was time, for already the terrified shrieks came plainly to his ears, mingled with the ferocious laughter of the outlaws.

Prince hastened to the spot from whence these cries proceeded, and found at least a dozen women slaves; but where was the one he sought—where was Blanche Forrester?

At his command the outlaws scattered over the building to search for her, while he questioned the slaves. These, in their terror, could or would give him no information.

In a few minutes later the outlaws returned declaring that the maiden was not to be found. Every room, closet and corner was thoroughly searched; but the missing one was not found.

As he glanced from one speaker to another, Black Prince beheld the pale features of Judge Forrester, held a prisoner by a negro. Drawing a knife, he demanded:

"Tell me whar you hide de gal, or I kill you. Speak quick!"

"She is far away from here, and safe from your foul hands—thank God!" fervently cried Forrester.

"Tell me—I cut your heart out!" reiterated Prince.

The white-haired man smiled contemptuously, as his gaze firmly met that of the enraged outlaw. That look and smile fairly maddened Black Prince, and he plunged the knife to its very hilt in the old man's bosom, yelling as he tore off the white-haired scalp:

"Burn—burn de house! Kill de gals—do what

you like. Dis night is de debble's—de debble's work!"

CHAPTER V.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

ALTHOUGH at the cost of his life, Jelly Jim had carried out the resolution that came to him as he lay beneath the forest trees listening to the plans of Black Prince. Breathless and exhausted he reached the plantation from which he had been stolen a year before, and seeking the presence of Judge Forrester, made known to him the threatening peril. At first the planter could not bring himself to believe in its truth, thinking that Jelly Jim had concocted the story to delay awkward questions as to the cause of his abrupt disappearance and long absence.

But bright-eyed Blanche Forrester thought differently. She felt that the slave was speaking no more than the simple truth. She did not believe that Jelly Jim would lie to her, with the memory of her past kindness still fresh in his mind.

And, as she avowed her belief in the story, the old man's doubts grew weaker and more faint, and Jelly Jim was dispatched to collect such of the slaves as were working within convenient distances. Though the old man's frame was bowed and his hair was white as silver, the marauders should find him no feeble, unresisting prey. Now, as before, he would fight them. And yet, despite his courage, the old man was sorely troubled as his eye rested upon the form of his loved daughter, as she bustled about the building with a sunny smile upon her face, a merry word parting her ripe lips. His heart grew faint and filled with trembling, but not for himself. He thought of what would be her fate, in case the enemy should triumph and she fell into his merciless clutches. Better a thousand times that she should suffer death, precious and beautiful as life was to one so young as she.

"Blanche, my child, and you, Eddie, come here," Judge Forrester said, and the next moment they were beside him.

Well might the old man be proud of his children; in the maiden, his young and idolized wife lived again; in the lad, he saw the picture of himself as he was in the years long gone by. With an arm around each, he drew them close to his side, struggling hard to hide the emotion that tore his heart. It was very hard to part with them, to send them out to brave the dangers of the forest and swamp alone, even though it was done for their own good.

Blanche Forrester was more than beautiful, she was lovely—bewitchingly so; full of that nameless charm that almost insensibly intoxicates one's senses, until he wakes and finds himself fast fettered in chains that, silken though they be, he is powerless to break, even did he possess the will. She was slightly above the medium high of women, straight and symmetrical as the young poplar, yet supple and willowy in her build. Her form was superbly developed and would have satisfied the most critical of sculptors. Her face was a perfect oval, with clearly-cut features, departing just enough from the classic mold to be truly lovable. Her complexion was rarely pure, of that white, waxy tint through which the warm blood could be

plainly discerned, as it ebbed and flowed with every emotion; now pale and statuesque, now warm with blushes, full of life and ardent passions. Her hair, a rich nut-brown, silken and glossy, hung down her shoulders, secured only by a band of ribbon. Her eyes, full, lustrous, expressive, changing from hazel to deepest jet, as her emotions varied; eyes that could melt with the voluptuous softness of love, or flash and sparkle with the fire of anger—eyes that were beautiful in every change. The low yet broad forehead, the arched brows, the long, silken lashes, the small mouth, with its full, slightly pouting lips, ripe, juicy and red as a moss rose, moistened with the dews of evening, now parting slightly with a smile that gave a glimpse of the trim rows of pearly teeth, the dimpled chin and swelling throat; such, as nearly as feeble words can describe her, was Blanche Forrester.

"My children, you have heard what Jelly Jim says. If he tells the truth about this man's force, we are in great danger. We cannot hope to hold out against them long. There is one hope for us; you can save us if you do as I bid you," added the old planter hurriedly.

"Tell us how, dear father," answered Blanche.

"It will be hard for you to do—hard for me to ask it of you; but, remember that it is your duty. There are none of the slaves that I could trust with such a message; besides, they would not be believed. You two must go. You know the trail that leads to Maupin's plantation. Tell him what is in the wind, and ask him for assistance in my name. You can remain there in safety. Maupin will spread the tidings. This you can do, and I trust you will, without my having to add my commands."

The scene was a painful one. It cut the old man to the very heart to speak sternly, but Blanche and Eddie refused to leave him, declaring their resolve to remain and share his fate, be it for better or worse. It was only until he commanded their obedience that they prepared for the mission.

A negro was to accompany them; Lame Cudjo, who was never more completely at home than when treading the tangled recesses of the swamps and forest, crippled as he was. And then the father sent them from him, choking down his emotions, for the forebodings of the dread truth pressed heavily upon his heart; he believed that the sands of his life were well-nigh run—that he would never live to welcome the return of his loved children. But were they saved, he could die content.

Cudjo led the way out at the back door, and hobbled along the plainly-defined trail that cut in two the tract of ground behind the building. Pausing for a moment upon the edge of the forest, Blanche and Eddie waved their hands toward the door where stood their father. It was their last greeting—the last time their eyes rested on his loved face.

Just as Black Prince came up, Cudjo led the way into the forest. There had been no time to lose.

For an hour more the trio journeyed on through the forest and swamp. Beneath the dense foliage it was growing darker and more

gloomy, though the sun was still some distance above the horizon. The brother and sister were pale and anxious. They had heard the faint muffled report of fire-arms, and knew that the planter had been attacked by the negro outlaws. But now all was still. How had the affair terminated? Had the outlaws been triumphant, or had they been defeated? The terrible uncertainty had been heart-sickening.

They were pressing up the bank of a broad, deep bayou. At times they could distinguish the loathsome shapes of alligators gliding slowly through the foul water, or hear their loud snorts as they plunged from the bank, disturbed by the advancing footsteps. Cudjo seemed greatly excited, as he ever was when near the huge saurians. He reviled them with all the skill of a Northern negro, taunting them with stupidity, accusing them of cowardice and treachery. Neither the commands of Blanche nor young Eddie were of any avail. The imp was beyond their control, and seemed fairly wild.

Clutching a vine, he clambered up into the limbs of a tree that overhung the dark water, swinging there like an ape, reviling the huge alligator that swam in circles below him, its fishy eye upon its expected prey. In cries Blanche commanded Cudjo to descend and cease his folly, and only when Eddie angrily threatened him with the light rifle, did the negro turn to descend.

The treacherous limb broke beneath his weight, and Cudjo fell several feet, catching upon a frail vine. The alligator raised its head, the huge jaws clashing viciously together. In breathless dismay brother and sister watched the swaying figure, that was cautiously ascending the frail vine. Cudjo realized his peril, and his taunts and reviling were now silenced.

Just as he seemed out of danger the vine broke, and the form of the cripple shot swiftly down into the jaws that closed upon him like a steel-trap. Quick as thought Eddie fired, but the bullet glanced harmlessly from the scaly shield, and with a triumphant splash of the tail, the alligator sunk down beneath the surface, having in its jaw the mangled form of Cudjo.

For fully an hour Blanche and Eddie waited and watched beside the bayou, hoping against reason, loth to believe that their guide was indeed dead. But neither Cudjo nor the alligator appeared, and they were forced to believe the worst.

"He is dead!" cried Blanche, with a long-drawn breath. "Come, we must go. We have already lost too much time. Remember father is in danger."

"But sister, which is the way? I have been trying to think, but everything seems turned around. I can't make out where we are!" faltered the lad, gazing around with bewildered eyes.

Blanche turned paler than ever, for she had heard what it was to be lost in those tangled recesses. Many were the tragic tales whispered around the firesides in the slave-quarters, detailing the horrible sufferings and privations of people who had lost themselves in the swamps. They came to her mind now, fresh and distinct.

Still, she fought against the feeling, knowing that to give way was only to insure their fate.

"Cudjo was heading up this bayou; then that must be the right direction. Come, we will—we must find our way out of this horrible place. Remember that father's life may depend upon our courage now—think of that and be a man."

"I am not afraid for myself, sister," quickly replied Eddie. "But you know what the servants sometimes said of Cudjo. They said that at times he was crazy, and did not know what he was doing. I believe he was crazy to-day, and forgot what father told him. You know how he acted; always before he would obey your slightest wish. I'm afraid he has led us astray into the swamp."

"Let us hasten on—do not speak of that again. We must keep cool and our minds clear now, or we are lost," hurriedly added the maiden, though the same fear was chilling her own heart.

For full an hour they pressed up the bayou bank in silence, their progress growing more and more difficult with every rod traversed. The ground became more moist and spongy. At times they were forced to wade through water knee-deep. They knew now that a bayou lay close upon the other hand, but hoping that there was a passage between them to firmer ground beyond, they pressed on.

Then Blanche uttered a moan of despair. Before them and upon either hand lay a broad sheet of black, foul water. The bayous connected. Their further progress was cut off. Now all doubt was set forever at rest. They were lost in the swamp. Cudjo had led them astray.

Though they had been expecting this, the blow was none the less heavy. With their arms wrapped around each other, brother and sister sunk down upon the ground, giving full vent to their feelings. Blanche was the first to recover herself, and said, bravely choking down her emotion.

"Come, Eddie, this will never do. We must not forget poor father. We must try to find our way out of this frightful place. By following the bayou back, we may be able to regain the right trail. At least, we can find our way back to the house."

"And find them all murdered."

"Hush! we will hope not," faintly murmured Blanche.

In silence, they turned and sought to retrace their steps. With infinite difficulty they managed to regain the spot where poor, crazy Cudjo had met his death; but beyond that they were soon at a loss. Night had settled over the earth, and in the swamp all was intense gloom. The sense of sight availed the wanderers but little. Small wonder, then, was it that they went astray. At length they could no longer blind themselves to this fact. Giving way to despair, they sunk down at the foot of a huge tree, mingling their tears together.

"Look yonder!" suddenly cried Eddie, raising his hand. "Is that the sun rising, sister?"

Through the interlaced treetops shone a bright light. The lurid glare was different from that of the sun. Blanche uttered a cry of horror, as she realized the truth.

"My God! 'tis our house—those fiends have set it afire!"

Half-crazed by the thought, the brother and sister rose to their feet and hastened toward the point from whence the light proceeded. They did not pause to reflect upon what would be their own fate should they fall into the hands of the outlaws; they had thought only for their father.

Unconsciously, their wanderings had carried them nearly to the boundaries of the Forrester plantation, and in a few minutes they burst out of the forest into the open ground. The sight that met their agitated gaze held them spell-bound.

Their beautiful home was wrapped in flames. Around it danced black, fiendish forms, yelling with exultation. Almost obliterated by the broad, increasing flood of light, half a dozen torches were moving swiftly through the grounds, borne by half-nude negroes, their heads bent low over the ground.

For a moment the maiden's eyes rested vacantly upon these, but then the truth flashed upon her mind. The negroes, having finished their bloody work at the house, were searching for the trails of those who had escaped their toils.

"See! Eddie, they are searching for us. Better death in the swamps than to fall into *their* clutches! And then we must escape, to tell the story of this night's work, or who would know how to avenge poor father? Come—we must hide!"

Her voice was low and even, her tones calm and collected. In that hour of trial her true spirit shone forth. As quietly, the high-spirited lad gave way to her will. From that time on, she was to be the leading power.

"Hooh! dar dey is now!" yelled a loud voice, from no great distance. "Dar dey is—ketch 'um—quick!"

"They have discovered us, Eddie," murmured Blanche, her eyes sparkling. "Quick—this way! If we can dodge them for a few minutes, perhaps we can creep away for good!"

Darting into the shade of the trees, Blanche veered abruptly to the left, closely followed by Eddie. Running a short distance, she crouched down beneath a dense clump of bushes, and then listened breathlessly.

Black Prince—for it was he who had given the alarm—darted into the timber, swinging the blazing torch around his head, looking, more than ever, like a fiend incarnate. Failing to discover the forms of the fugitives, he bent down over the moist ground.

There he saw three sets of tracks, and as they agreed with the confession of one of the tortured slaves, he darted along the trail at full speed. As Blanche saw him depart upon the old trail, she crept from her cover, and once more started through the woods, Eddie quietly following, still clutching his rifle.

Black Prince uttered another yell, which was answered by his men, who now hastened to the forest. Knowing that the right trail might be struck at any moment, the fugitives pressed on with the speed lent by fear. But it was not recorded that they should escape the toils that encompassed them. In fleeing from one peril,

they were rushing blindly upon another, no less deadly.

A shrill shriek broke from the maiden's lips, as she ran violently against a yielding substance, and then felt herself tightly clasped in a pair of human arms. In vain she sought to free herself; the arms held her fast.

Then a lurid glare filled her eyes, and she fell back, blinded, half-senseless, her face covered with a hot, loathsome substance. The sharp report of a rifle filled the air.

"Run, sister, run! I've killed him—run quick, and we may get away yet!" cried Eddie, excitedly.

Realizing her peril, the brave lad had thrust forward the muzzle of his rifle until it fairly touched the dimly-outlined figure, and then pulled the trigger. With a dull groan, the savage sunk to the ground, with skull shattered like an egg-shell. Then Eddie shouted to his sister, and sought to raise her from the ground.

It was his last action in life. The sharp edge of a tomahawk fell upon his bowed head, and he sunk across the senseless form of his sister, dead.

At that moment Black Prince leaped through the bushes, his blazing torch lighting up the tragic scene. He started back with an angry cry as he saw the prostrate, blood-covered forms; but his tone changed as he recognized the figure standing over them. It was that of King Payne, the Seminole chief.

"Look and see if the squaw is dead," he uttered, coldly, in his own tongue.

"No, she is alive. Sure Eye will be glad, for he sent me for her. He means she shall be his squaw," said Prince, after a hasty examination.

"What claim has he to the captive of King Payne? He must look further for a squaw," coldly said the Seminole.

"She was my captive—she just broke away from me," sullenly lied Prince.

"She is mine, now; that is enough. If Sure Eye wants her, tell him to come and take her."

So speaking, King Payne made a gesture to his braves, two of whom quickly constructed a litter, upon which Blanche was placed.

CHAPTER VI.

QUEEN OF THE LAKE.

"WUSS'N a crazy bedbug or a chicken 'th its head chopped off! Here, thar, back ag'in an' over yender, paddlin' like ge-thunder—an' what far? Durned ef I kin see. It beats me—I cavel!"

These words broke almost inaudibly from the lips of Left-Handed Pete, as he balanced himself upon a gnarled and twisted limb, some twenty feet from the ground, in the heart of a bushy tree. He was perching the interlaced foliage, gazing out upon the smooth, tranquil bosom of Lake Pithlachocco. Skimming lightly, swiftly as a swallow, here and there erratically, was a single person in a frail, graceful canoe. Now darting forward, direct as the flight of an arrow, and with truly wonderful swiftness now turning abruptly at right-angles, or else whirling dizzily around in rapidly-narrowing circles. Little wonder that Left-Handed Pete was surprised and his curiosity strongly excited.

"A blind man could see she is a woman," muttered the scout, unconsciously, "by the way the critter cuts around, 'thout sense or reason. What kin she be up to, anyhow? Ef I hedn't bin so keerful 'th my trail, I'd hafe b'lieved she war tryin' to captivate me—fer she hez got a shape to hug a man plum crazy, ef she is a heathen red-skin."

The keen eyes of the young scout sparkled brightly, filled with an admiration that he could not suppress, as the canoe darted nearer his lurking place. As though to give him full time to impress her face and form upon his memory, the Indian woman checked her canoe when within a score or two yards of the shore, directly opposite Hoffman's covert, and sat idly toying with the water, ruffling its smooth surface with her little hand.

"Everlastin' ge-mently! Pete, jest look at that!" gasped the scout, his eyes opened wide with genuine surprise. "Sech a face—sech a figger—sech a all over from stem to starn!"

And truly there was ground for the young scout's wondering admiration. Never before had he set eyes upon such a perfect specimen of rich, oriental beauty. For this Indian maiden was none other than King Payne's daughter, Enowilla.

Suddenly, springing into full life once more, Enowilla whirled the head of the canoe around and paddled swiftly up the lake shore. The action broke the spell that had held Hoffman, and, acting upon a sudden impulse, he swung himself lightly to the ground and ran rapidly along in the same direction she had taken.

"I never wished I was an Injun afore, but ef I could git sech a squaw as she is, durned ef I wouldn't turn heathen this very minnit!" muttered Left-Handed Pete, as he darted on, forgetting all save the forest witch ahead of him, thinking nothing of the broad trail he was leaving behind him, thus undoing the caution of the past few days. "I'll find out whar she's goin' ef it kills me! Mebbe she's out lookin' fer me—mebbe she dreamt thar was a han'-some young feller out here in the woods, jest sp'ilin' fer an introduction—mebbe—Pete, you're a durned fool!"

The scout abruptly checked his fantastic musing, but did not relax his efforts in the least, though the fair occupant of the canoe was gradually distancing him, since she had to encounter none of the obstacles that delayed his progress.

Though so far losing sight of his usual caution, Pete was careful to keep hidden from view of the Indian girl, knowing that should she catch a glimpse of him, the canoe would shoot across the lake to where the Seminole village was located, and thus he would lose all hope of learning more of her, as well as run no slight danger of losing his own scalp. He had sense enough to know that she was a full-blooded Indian, and, naturally, her sympathies would be with his enemies. For this reason, he was careful to keep out of her sight.

Fortunately for his object, Enowilla began to ply the paddle more deliberately, and, as the speed of the canoe slackened, Pete gradually recovered the ground that he had lost. They

had proceeded thus for perhaps a mile, when the scout abruptly paused.

"She's goin' to come ashore, by thunder! It'd be a good chaine—but shell I? Like's not she'd be skeered to death or into fits, even ef I ain't so bad-lookin'. I'd gi'n a good 'eal to make her 'quaintance—but thar ain't nobody to introduce us," muttered Hoffman, falling into an old habit of giving audible utterance to the thoughts that filled his mind, though half the time being ignorant of the fact.

Such was the case now. The words passed his lips, but he did not know it. He was busy thinking, trying to decide whether the chances were in favor of or against a plan that had suddenly entered his mind, suggested by the sight of the Indian girl. The opportunity was a good one, and yet he feared to put it to the test.

After his escape from the negroes by crossing the alligator-infested bayou, Left-Handed Pete had ranged along the water's edge until he found a tolerable crossing-place, though it was nearly daylight ere he succeeded. He gained the glade where he had made the futile attempt to free Harry Vories, but found it deserted. He lost no time in taking up the trail, but soon afterward lost it in the swamp, beside a broad bayou. He never regained the lost trail. It seemed as though Daniel McGirth had anticipated pursuit, from the extraordinary care and cunning he had displayed. But a thorough scout, and second to none in the land before he became such a slave to strong drink, the renegade resolved that his prize should be lost through no fault of his, and acted as though he knew his trail would be searched for by a thousand deadly foemen. That he had not entirely forgotten his cunning, was plain from its baffling Left-Handed Pete.

At length, after reasoning upon the matter, Hoffman struck out for King Payne's village, though he knew that Vories had been captured by negroes, not Seminoles. For one day and night he had scouted around Cuscorrilla, without gaining any information. Knowing that discovery would almost inevitably follow such a step, he had not ventured to enter the village, though, had he really known that Vories was held there a prisoner, he would have run the risk without a moment's hesitation.

Believing that this Indian girl belonged to the village, Hoffman was debating whether he should waylay her in the forest on the chance of gaining some information from her. Had she been old and ugly, he would not have hesitated one moment, for then he would not have felt any great compunction at effectually silencing her, to keep her from setting the warriors upon his trail. But now—he knew that his hand would fall helpless, his heart refuse to find the courage to injure her, even while his safety demanded it.

These thoughts passed through his mind with the rapidity of light, as the Indian girl turned the prow of her canoe toward shore. She sprang lightly to land, then drawing the boat up on the beach, turned and entered the forest.

Still doubting, Left-Handed Pete remained hidden in the bushes that clustered around the huge tree. He caught a glimpse of Enowilla as

she flitted through the woods, and saw that she was armed with a bow, a feathered shaft fitted to the string, as though some sort of game was within sight.

"I'll snake on an' see what she's up to, anyhow," the scout said, rising erect. "Then I'll see about the rest. Maybe I could make her promise not to tell. But ef she *should*, I'd hev to git up an' dust pritty lively, onless I make up my mind to take a share of what's in store fer Harry. One man ag'in' a hundred is long odds; a feller wouldn't stan' no gre't show o' savin' his own skelp, let alone another feller's."

The scout's musings came to an abrupt termination, and he paused, every fiber thrilling, his eyes glowing like living coals. A significant sound filled the air, a sound familiar to his ears from childhood. Words can scarcely describe it. First there was a loud, purring *miou*; closely following this came a long-drawn quavering cry, almost wail, ending in a vicious, spitting snarl. It was the war-cry of that king of the Southern forests, the panther.

Closely following this cry, the scout could just distinguish the sharp twang of a bow-string, and he knew that the Indian girl had sent a feathered shaft at the wild beast. And from the angry, snarling yell that echoed through the leafy aisles, Pete knew that the panther had been wounded.

"The pesky fool! She'll be tored to pieces like nothin'!" he ejaculated, as he sprung rapidly toward the spot from whence the mingled sounds proceeded, sharply cocking his rifle as he did so.

Half a dozen huge strides carried him into full view of the strange antagonists, and for a moment the scout stood as if spell bound. His heart thrilled with admiration. In that moment he forgot all the dictates of prudence, and he resolved to save this forest heroine, be the consequences what they might.

Crouching upon the ground near the center of a miniature glade was the panther, snapping viciously at the shaft of an arrow, the barb of which was deeply buried in his throat. Scarce two yards away stood Enowilla, fitting a second arrow to the stout bow-string. Then the tough wood was bent, the arrow drawn nearly to its head; the treacherous string snapped sullenly, and both bow and arrow dropped uselessly from the maiden's hand.

It was at that moment Left-Handed Pete caught sight of her. As the faithless weapons fell from her grasp, he saw Enowilla clutch the knife from her girdle, and draw it flashing from its bead-broidered sheath. With this alone between her and death, she boldly faced the maddened brute, whose powerful jaws just succeeded in snapping the rankling arrow in two. With the knife guarding her throat, the Indian girl stood there firm and undaunted, a true child of the forest.

As he saw the fierce brute crouching low for its fatal leap, Left-Handed Pete flung up his rifle, the silver drop covering the flat skull. But he didn't fire. Even in that moment he remembered his mission, and feared to fire, lest the report should draw the Seminoles or scarcely less-to-be-dreaded negro refugee upon his trail.

Dropping the rifle, he leaped forward, drawing a long, keen-bladed knife. As though hastened in its leap by the sight of another antagonist, the panther shot through the air, springing full at the Indian maiden's throat.

But Enowilla was upon guard, and adroitly crouching, she allowed the huge beast to pass over her head, dealing it a vicious upward thrust as it did so. To her astonishment the panther's body came in contact with a human form, and both fell heavily to the ground together, struggling, writhing, rolling over and over in a confused, tang'ed mass, half-hidden by the dirt and decaying leaves tossed upon the air.

Scarce ten seconds had the furious death-grapple lasted when the gashed and bleeding form of the gaunt beast was hurled violently aside, and the man leaped to his feet, the blood trickling from more than one wound, revealed through the rent and tattered garments, where the long yellow talons of the forest king had left their indelible marks.

"Wait—do not flee—you have nothing to fear from me," hurriedly uttered Hoffman, as Enowilla started back.

Bearing her own tongue, though spoken by a white man, the Indian maiden seemed reassured, and with a half-smile, she replied, speaking with a native dignity that well suited her oriental, barbaric beauty:

"I was not afraid of *that*, when alive; I am not afraid of you, though your skin is white, because you proved yourself a true brave in killing the panther; and a brave does not war with squaws."

"I'd do a 'nough sight more'n that fer sech a pritty gal as you—that is—" stammered Pete, a little confusedly, as Enowilla drew slightly back. "You don't understand English, then?"

"Yes—better than speak it," replied Enowilla.

"That's jest my orful condition; I kin understand Seminole like a book, but my tongue ain't sca'cely limber enough to speak it peart. I'll talk this-a-way, an' you kin use your own lingo. Will you tell me somethin' ef I ax it of you?"

"If I can. You saved my life, when that beast would have killed me. Enowilla does not forget in a breath. None but a brave man would have used only a knife, while he had a rifle. But your gun is broken?"

"No—it's all right. I'll tell you the truth—I don't know why it is, 'zactly, but I don't b'lieve I could tell you a lie to save my gizzard! I didn't think I'd ever git stuck over a Injun gal—thar! 'xcuse me—I didn't know jest what I was sayin'," and again the scout blushed a fiery-red as he caught the wondering look in the Indian maiden's eyes. "I said I'd tell you the truth, an' so I will, though by doin' so I put my life in your hands. Ef you're the true woman I think you, it'll be safe; if not—then no matter."

"If you doubt, do not trust the Indian girl," quietly responded Enowilla, slightly accenting his words.

"I don't doubt no longer—only I wish 't I didn't doubt one thing. Yas, as I was sayin', I'in what your folks 'd call a bad man—thar inemy. They'd tell you that I'd fought them,

killed them an' lifted the scalps o' more'n one on 'em. But that don't matter now. I'm called Left-Hand Pete by my fri'nds—Double-Knife by your folks. I was one of the whites who was surprised by the red-skins over yonder, t'other day. I stayed behind the rest to look for a fri'nd o' mine, which was captered by the white Injun that leads a lot o' niggers to battle. I lost the trail, but I b'lieve he is kep' a captyve in the village yonder. Will you tell me whether he is thar?" and Left-Handed Pete gave a hasty description of Harry Vories.

"Yes, the one you seek is held a captive in Cuscorrilla. He belongs to Sure Eye, who swears that he shall die by the fire torture. He was to have burned on this night, but Sure Eye is troubled about the pale maiden that the great chief claims. He says that she belongs to him—but King Payne laughs at his anger."

"A white gal, too?"

"Yes. Is she a friend of yours, too? The young brave you ask for weeps his heart dead at her sorrow. He loves her like his eye, and she loves him as much."

"What?—kin it be? You know her name?"

"I have heard it—but it is hard for my tongue to speak. If I could hear it spoken, then I could tell you yes or no."

"Was it Blanche—Blanche Forrester?"

"That is the name. She is there, a prisoner, too, though my father, the great chief, looks upon her with soft eyes. Sure Eye sent his black men off to fetch him this white squaw. They burned the lodge, and killed the people in it, but she ran away and hid in the woods. There King Payne found her, and now Sure Eye claims her. But he is a fool—a great chief will raise his heel and put it upon the white snake's head before long."

"Then thar's more work cut out for me than I thought for. Harry won't leave without his sweetness," mused Pete, then adding: "Will you carry him a message from me?"

"Let me hear it first. Enowilla is a Seminole. She can not betray her people," quietly replied the maiden.

"Tain't much. Jest tell him that Pete is alive an' on the look-out. Tell him you've seen him and talked with him."

"I will. And the white squaw? Is there no message for her?"

"Yes—this," and moved by a sudden impulse that he was powerless to resist, Hoffman flung his arms around her waist and pressed a hot kiss upon her ripe lips.

Enowilla twisted free, and half-drew her knife, but then paused. On the whole, she did not appear greatly alarmed.

"I couldn't help it—you are so pritty—your lips looked so sweet that I felt I must taste 'em or bu'st. You ain't mad at me?" faltered Pete.

"No—not much, but you must not act so again. And now I must go. I will deliver your messages."

"You will meet me here to-morrer to tell me what they say?"

"Yes—at this hour. But lie close, or the Seminole braves will find you," and then she turred and glided rapidly away.

CHAPTER VII.

KING, PRINCE, AND RENEGADE.

MEANTIME matters were fast coming to a head at Cuscorrilla. The village was divided against itself, and partisan spirit ran high, threatening to end in the division of the allies, if not worse. Already threats had passed between the leaders, though as yet no blows had been dealt. Still the bad blood was gaining ground, and it would take but little more to set the entire village by the ears.

King Paine had returned to Cuscorrilla with his fair captive, Blanche Forrester. This was a surprise for Daniel McGirth, but at first he felt little or no uneasiness for the result, believing that he could easily purchase Blanche of the chief. But his offers were coldly rejected; King Payne declared that he had set his mind upon having a pale-faced queen, and Blanche suited him better than any other he could find.

Tired at last of the importunities of Sure Eye, King Payne cunningly said he would exchange captives, as he had taken a fancy to the young Long-knife, and thought it a pity that such a promising brave should be put to peath. If McGirth would give him Harry Vories, he could have the girl instead. Of course this proposition was declined, just as the chief had expected, for he knew how deep and bitter was the renegade's hatred toward the young scout.

The situation was peculiar. Billy Bowlegs was absent on an expedition against the northern settlements, and had taken with him the majority of the Seminoles. Of able warriors King Payne could not muster more than two score. McGirth had ever been a popular partisan leader, and besides his force of negroes under Black Prince, could muster fully a score of Indians, composed for the most part of Creeks, stout warriors who had followed his varying fortunes for years, upon whom he could depend as upon himself. Thus, all in all, his force was quite equal in numbers to that under King Payne's control.

Neither cared to begin the hostilities by striking the first blow. McGirth knew that, should he do so, Bowlegs would wage a war of extermination upon him and his band. King Payne was equally reluctant, since he had the squaws and papposes to guard as well. Secretly dispatching a runner with the tidings to Bowlegs, he resolved upon a bold move, by which he hoped to prevent Sure Eye from departing before Bowlegs could return.

Harry Vories was kept, closely bound, in a stout building near the edge of the negro quarters. Though the Seminoles called the negroes their friends and allies, the latter were looked down upon and held as inferior to the red-skins. The two races intermingled but little; even their lodges were kept apart, a deep, water-filled ditch separating the two sections.

On the evening of the day on which Enowilla first met Left-Handed Pete, McGirth resolved to remove his prisoner to a safer place, no doubt hoping to throw King Payne off his guard by his departure, trusting that he could then steal away Blanche. To his intense surprise, he found the building empty and unguarded.

As soon as his astonishment would permit, he raised the rallying-cry. Instantly the Indians

and negroes flocked from their lodges, armed and ready for whatever their leader willed. Among them came the negroes he had left on guard around the prison-lodge. Choking down his rage, he demanded of them why they had abandoned their post, and what had become of their prisoner. The affair was quickly explained.

Just after dark one of the Creek Indians had hastily approached the guard, with several more red-skins at his heels. Though the night was sultry, these were wrapped in their blankets, but the guard did not suspect anything wrong, knowing that the spokesman, Katow, was trusted by Sure Eye. The Creek told him that McGirth was waiting them in the forest, beside the lake, and that he had sent the Indians to take their places as guards. They obeyed, hastened at once to the spot designated, but, not finding the renegade, had returned to the village, just as the rallying cry was sounded.

Such was the excuse offered by the negro for himself and brother guards. McGirth believed him, and at once jumped to the conclusion that this was the work of King Payne, who doubtless meant to hold Vories as a surety against any outbreak or revolt, knowing that the renegade would sooner lose his own life than allow the young man to escape the doom he had sworn should be his.

McGirth hastily gave orders for the best scouts to scatter out and surround the village, but hold themselves in readiness to rush to a common center at his first signal-cry. By this means he hoped to foil the object of the Seminole, for he did not believe that King Payne had had a chance of getting Vories clear of the village unseen. If he was still near at hand, it was likely that Payne would surrender him rather than risk a pitched battle.

Selecting a dozen of his most trusted men, both blacks and Creeks, McGirth crossed the water-ditch and strode up to the door of the chief's lodge. A rapid glance around confirmed his suspicions. The Seminole braves were all outside of their lodges, armed to the teeth, carelessly as they bore the weapons. In ten seconds King Payne could have his entire forces around him.

The lodge-door was pushed aside, and then closed behind the form of the chief. He expressed no surprise at the number or attitude of his visitors, but waited in silence for the renegade to speak.

"Chief, where is my captive?" abruptly demanded McGirth, choking down his passion as well as he could.

"Why do you ask me?" coldly returned the chief. "Go and ask him of your guards."

"So I have and they tell me that you have stolen him away."

"Then their tongues are forked—they lie."

"Chief, you know where he is hidden, if he is not in your own lodge, as I believe. He belongs to me. My men took him prisoner. By your laws, he is mine to do with as I choose. You have no right to steal him away. Give him up to me, and we will still be friends and brothers."

"I have spoken. Go to your lodge and sleep

until the fire-water leaves your brain," coldly retorted King Payne.

"If I do go without my captive it will be to return in a different style. Think well what you decide, chief. I have called you brother for many long moons. I have fought for you, and have shed my blood for you; but I am a brave, and you have no authority to steal away my rights. Come—brothers should not fight among themselves. Give me back the young Long-knife, and I will go away. You can keep the squaw—it is not for men to fight about a woman. Give me the pale-face, and I will take my braves far away until the clouds all clear off, and nothing but peace and friendship rests between us," urged McGirth.

"I have spoken, and a chief does not know how to say two things in one breath. You can go; I have no pale face to give up to you."

"You choose war, then, instead of peace?" quietly said the renegade, his face turning a peculiar gray color.

King Payne vouchsafed no answer to this, but turned abruptly on his heel and re-entered his lodge. As the skin door fell in his face, McGirth uttered a furious curse of rage and disappointment. For a moment he glared around upon his braves, and his lips parted to give the signal that could end only in a deadly, hand-to-hand struggle; but he choked back the sound. In his cunning, he distrusted the Seminole chief. He believed that King Payne would not dare act so loftily unless he had received reinforcements. If this was so it would be rank folly to dare an open attack, since the parties had been so evenly matched before. And so he bided his time, resolving to find out whether his surmise was correct or not, before compromising himself further.

King Payne paused just within the lodge, and listened intently, one hand upon the hatchet at his girdle. He half-expected that the angry renegade would dash aside the hanging door and force an entrance, to see for himself whether the missing man was concealed within. Had he done so, that action would have been his last in life; but after a few moments' waiting, King Payne heard the sound of their departing footsteps.

Smiling grimly, he turned around, glancing at a dimly-outlined form lying upon a skin pallet at the other side of the lodge. The suspicions of McGirth had indeed been well-founded. This figure was none other than that of Harry Vories. King Payne spoke the English language quite fluently, though with a marked accent.

"Did you hear what was spoken outside, just now?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"Yes; but I could not understand much of it. I'm a poor hand at your lingo. I made out that that devil of a renegade was trying to scare you into giving me up to him," promptly replied Harry.

"He is a fool. I will take his scalp if he does not mind."

"He has men enough to make you trouble," thoughtfully added Vories. "You will give me up to him before you come to blows."

"No—for then the white dog would say I was

afraid of his threats. He can only get you by walking over me," the old chief quietly replied.

"Then—see here. I don't pretend to love either you or your people, chief, but I think you are better than that cursed renegade. Now, if you do come to blows, can't you arrange it so's to let me take a hand in? McGirth can make a strong fight of it, if he minds, and you haven't any too many braves. If you say so, I will fight for you against him, and promise to make as good a score as your best brave."

"And then make your escape to your own people, laughing at how you threw dust in our eyes!"

"Is that the way you would do, chief?"

"Yes—unless I gave my word to surrender myself after the fight was over," King Payne promptly replied.

"Very well; I consider myself as good a man as you are, and of as much honor. I pledge you my word that if you give me my liberty, furnish me with weapons, and let me join you against that devil and his imps, I will not attempt to escape until you give me my parole."

"It is well. If Sure Eyes is fool enough to thrust his scalp into my hands, you shall help take it. There—you are free now. But, for your own sake, you'd better stay quiet in here until we see what Sure Eyes means to do. If he saw you now, he might trust to a rifle-shot to settle the matter, and then you would lose your share of the pleasure."

As he spoke, King Payne stooped and severed the bonds, and Vories stretched out his limbs with a great sigh of relief. Still, he had sense enough to see the prudence of the chief's advice, and resolved to follow it. He had already succeeded far beyond his most sanguine hope.

Daniel McGirth had withdrawn to his own portion of the village, and had called his men around him. For a time, he half-resolved to make an immediate attack upon the King Payne faction, but the belief before alluded to restrained him. After a brief consultation with the more trusted of his followers, he withdrew entirely from the village, finally pausing upon the lake-shore, throwing out his scouts to guard against any surprise, in case the Seminoles should attempt one.

The day came, and then McGirth satisfied himself that King Payne had received no reinforcements. In his rage at the lost opportunity, he challenged the Seminole chief to single combat, the two pale-face captives to be the reward of the victor. Payne replied that he would fight him, but that the captives belonged to the tribe, not to him alone. This was not what the renegade desired, and that project was dropped.

McGirth ground his teeth with rage as he saw the tall, lithe form of Harry Vories beside the chief, free, with weapons in his hands. Knowing nothing of the compact between the two, he believed that Vories had been given his freedom by King Payne, and the thought that his victim bade fair to yet slip through his fingers, set him fairly wild. And, in his madness, he gave the word that brought on the struggle.

Cheering on his men, he darted forward upon the Seminoles, and thus began a struggle such as is not often seen among the red-skins.

The scattering lodges afforded the only cover

upon the ground, which was clear and level, the only obstruction being the water-ditch that cut the village in twain. The Seminole chief had placed the women and children in the lodges at one end of the town, and detailed a few trusty braves to guard them. The main force would be near enough to support them in case of need.

As McGirth led the charge, the Seminoles advanced to meet it, and they fought for a few minutes more like white men than Indians, standing boldly up without care, face to face. At the first volley, half a dozen men fell, dead or dying, upon either side. The wounded only fought the more desperately for their smarting hurts.

McGirth staggered back, as a bullet creased his temple, just breaking the skin. Vories fired it, and only for his foot slipping at the moment of touching the trigger, he would have rid himself forever of his bitter foe.

For a few moments it seemed as though the dispute was to be settled then and there, at one blow. But both factions soon tired of such hot work, and fell back by mutual consent. They were so evenly matched that a single false move upon either side might prove fatal. A moment later, each party occupied their own portion of the village, eagerly watching for an opportunity to injure their opponents.

Thus the day dragged wearily away, with little loss to either side. Though the brief but desperate struggle of the morning had only whetted their appetite for blood, they were too evenly matched for either to give the other any advantage. Like the two school-boys, one was afraid, the other daren't.

In the afternoon, by King Payne's order, the Seminoles began discharging fire-tipped arrows into the enemy's quarters. For a time this seemed a failure, though one hut took fire and burned to the ground. But then one after another of the thoroughly seasoned lodges burst into a blaze, and became evident that McGirth's party must soon seek the open air, or remain to be smothered by the smoke, or burned alive.

Break cover they did, and, led by the renegade, desperately charged across the water-ditch. Though greeted with a storm of bullets and arrows that sent half a dozen of them headlong to the ground, the negroes and Creeks did not falter, but, with their thrilling yells, boldly dashed on. The reason was plain. They had been plentifully supplied with liquor until they were half-crazed demons rather than human beings. McGirth had resolved to do or die.

After the first volley, the Seminoles broke cover, emboldened now that they outnumbered the enemy. Then the two factions were mingled together in a furious, deadly hand-to-hand combat. Man to man they grappled and fought to the death, like roaring wild beasts. There was no thought of caution or prudence now.

Harry Vories sought to meet McGirth, but was repeatedly foiled by the surging of the tangled mass. And thus he found himself face to face with the giant negro, Prince. Swinging aloft the huge ax, that already dripped with the blood of two Seminoles, Black Prince hurled a deadly blow at the young scout's head. Armed only with a knife, Vories was too close to the lodge side to spring back, and as his only chance,

Left-Handed Pete.

aped heavily against the negro's chest. The ax-blade passed over his head, the helve falling upon his shoulder, partially benumbing his left arm. At the same moment, Vories struck viciously downward, burying the long-scalping-knife to its hilt just above the giant's collar-bone.

Uttering a horrible roar of agony, the giant flung his arms around the scout, and sought to bury his massive tusks in Vories's throat. But it was his last effort of life. With the sharp steel biting deep into his heart, he fell heavily backward, drawing the young man with him. The huge knotted arms were so tightly wound around his form, that Harry could scarcely extricate himself, and when he did manage it, he staggered back against the lodge, gasping for breath, feeling as though his ribs and breast-bone had been crushed together.

A quick glance around showed him that the Seminoles were surely getting the better of the fight. Already several of the blacks were fleeing from the spot, closely pursued by yelling Indians. King Payne was fighting like a giant against three Creeks, but was being pressed back. Yet he would not raise his voice for help.

Clutching the huge ax, Vories darted to the rescue. One blow crashed down through the skull of a Creek; another followed, almost before the survivor realized the truth. Uttering his wild war-cry, King Payne grappled with the third Creek, and almost immediately passed his knife through his ribs.

A cry of surprise broke from his lips as he glanced around. So busy had he been that the utter defeat of his enemies amazed him. Scarce a dozen remained alive, and they were fleeing, with the exultant Seminoles hot upon their track.

But where was McGirth? He was not to be seen, either among the living or the dead. Fearing he scarce knew what, Vories rushed to where the women were crowding the doors of the lodges. But Blanche was not there. She was gone!

CHAPTER VIII.

STEALING A MARCH.

FOR an hour or more after Enowilla left him, Pete Hoffman stood beside the forest monarch, whose low-drooping branches cast a grateful shade around, his eyes turned toward the point where the Indian maiden had vanished from his sight. The bold scout had been deeply impressed by Enowilla's grace and beauty; the more so perhaps from its being the first time he had ever encountered a beautiful aborigine.

"Wal, wal!" he at length uttered, heaving a deep sigh of mingled surprise, admiration and disgust, who'd 'a' thunk it! Pete, you're a dog-goned fool—an' she's a red-skin, too! Wuss and wuss, an' more of it! Left-Handed Pete gettin' spooney over an Injun gal—let the boys onc't git hold o' that an' I'd hev to leave the country or kill a thousand o' them. An' yit—she is pritty. Sech a form, sech ha'r, sech eyes, an'—oh, ge-mently! sech lips! They war made fer kissin', ef she is a red-skin."

How far the young ranger's thoughts would have carried him can only be surmised, for at

that moment he was brought once more to his sober senses by the sight of an Indian canoe, shooting swiftly across the lake. There was but one occupant, and, from the direction, Pete felt little dread of being discovered, but the sight recalled him to a sense of his situation, and he became once more the keen-witted, crafty scout. Carefully obliterating all trace of his passage, he sought another hiding-place, as before, in the dense foliage of a tree, and there he remained until night settled over the earth.

During that time of waiting, Left-Handed Pete saw more than one red-skin or negro, either paddling over the lake, among the miniature islands, or else skirting along the shore. But they evidently did not suspect the vicinity of a foeman, and that assured Hoffman that his trust in Enowilla had not been misplaced. He knew that she had not betrayed him.

Still, as the hours rolled on, Left-Handed Pete became more and more uneasy. He remembered that Enowilla had said upon this same night Harry Vories had originally been condemned to perish at the stake. Might not the difficulty between King Payne and Sure Eye have been satisfactorily arranged, and the renegade still carry out his scheme of revenge?

"I ain't a-goin' to stay here an' let 'em do that!" Left-Handed Pete at length decided. "I'll take a look at the ho'net's nest, anyhow. Ef they mean to barbecue Harry, they'll see some fun fust. I ain't goin' back on the lad now."

As Hoffman neared the Seminole village, his fears increased. It was plain that something unusual was transpiring at Cuscorrilla. And then, with rapidly-beating heart, the scout glared out upon the Indian town.

It was at the moment when King Payne confronted the angry renegade. The first glance showed Pete that what he had dreaded was not taking place. There was no gathering around the fire stake in the council square, no turbulent gathering of squaws and children. There was to be no "barbecue" on that night, at least.

Puzzled, Pete watched the village narrowly. He could guess, from what Enowilla had told him, that there was a division in the camp, and vaguely hoping that some advantage to him would arise from that fact, he kept upon the alert, and when Daniel McGirth withdrew his men from the village, Hoffman dogged them closely.

By cunning creeping, Pete managed to ensconce himself within ear-shot of the council that followed, when Sure Eye went into camp beside the lake. He heard all that followed, and knew that King Payne was now in possession of both Vories and Blanche Forrester. Yet this knowledge did not give him any great satisfaction. King Payne was a widely known name, and rumor gave the Seminole chief all the evil attributes as well as the skill and cunning of the arch fiend himself. Instead of having bettered himself, Pete believed that Harry had escaped from the frying-pan only to fall into the fire.

Pete made out enough of the consultation to know that McGirth was resolved to regain his lost captive, together with Blanche Forrester,

even if he had to risk a pitched battle for it. Having thoroughly reconnoitered Cuscorrilla, and knowing almost to a man the strength of both Indians and negroes, Pete felt that the renegade stood a fair show of success, and should the forces clash together on the coming day, the scales would be so evenly balanced that a breath might turn it either way.

McGirth now sent out scouts to lurk around the village, and Pete, not caring to incur more risk than was absolutely necessary, cautiously withdrew from the spot. Seeking his old retreat, he sunk down, cogitating deeply. He had learned enough during the past few hours to trouble him not a little. The task that he set himself was difficult enough in the first place, but was now rendered doubly so. The situation was indeed a complicated one.

"Before there was only one enemy to look out for, and that was a plenty. But now there's two, each one wuss'n t'other. Ef I could git the lad away from one, t'other 'd be on top o' me in a wink. 'Tain't likely both 'd be sleepin' at the same time. An' then—Harry wouldn't go off an' leave Blanche, even ef I could manage to set 'im free. Durn the crooked luck! What bizness has a scout fallin' in love with a gal fer, anyhow? It's all tomfoolery, any—"

Left-Handed Pete did not finish the sentence, for there came vividly before his mind the picture of a comely maid, dusky though her complexion was, and he suddenly felt that if Harry Vories was to blame, so was he; if ever mortal man was smitten with the charms of a maiden, Left-Handed Pete knew that he was "stuck" with Enowilla.

Presently he arose and glided toward Cuscorrilla. And through the rest of that night he hung around the village, hoping that something favorable might turn up. But in this he was disappointed. Not an Indian stirred from the village, though he could plainly see them standing guard, expecting an attack from McGirth's men.

As the day dawned, Pete watched anxiously as the drama gradually unfolded. He saw it all from his perch in a tree-top upon the edge of the forest. He saw the rival factions marshaled by their respective leaders, heard Daniel McGirth challenge King Payne to single combat, the two pale faces to be the wage of the victor, and heard the chief's reply. He saw that Harry Vories was beside the Seminole chief, unbound and with weapons in his hands. And then he heard Sure Eye give the signal, and saw the brief but mad struggle that ensued. Then came the retreat across the water-ditch, and the skirmishing fire from the two sections of the village.

The day dragged slowly along, and still the scout remained in the tree-top, anxiously watching the village. At one time his heart throbbed rapidly, and his eyes glistened brightly. At the door of one of the lodges nearest his position, he saw a number of Indian women; and among them one that he could not mistake. It was Enowilla, King Payne's daughter. She was gazing steadily toward the wood, and the cheek of the bold scout glowed warmly as the thought flashed upon his mind that she was thinking of her pledge to meet him upon the

lake shore. It might have been only fancy, but he thought she appeared impatient at thus being forced to break her word.

"It may be a fool trick, but here goes to let her know I'm on hand," muttered Hoffman, drawing a red silk handkerchief from his bosom.

Parting the leaves, he cautiously waved the cloth, choosing those moments in which Enowilla appeared gazing directly toward him. The distance was not great, certainly not over a quarter of a mile, and the bright handkerchief shone clearly against the green foliage.

At the third wave, Pete fancied that Enowilla started, as though she saw the signal, and he boldly parted the leaves until half his form was visible. It was with a strange fluttering at his heart that he saw the maiden raise her hand and make a quick gesture toward him. He knew then that she had recognized him.

A few moments later he saw her pass by the guards, and glide rapidly toward the forest, keeping the lodge in a line with those beyond the water-ditch. Hastily descending, Pete advanced to the edge of the forest, trembling like a young girl, as Enowilla approached him.

"What do you do here?" Enowilla hurriedly exclaimed, as she stood before the scout, hidden from view of those in the village by a fringe of bushes. "If the Seminoles see you, they will take your scalp."

"I expect they would, if they could catch me. I come here to see if I couldn't do somethin' to help my fr'ind. But I find he's loose, fightin' with your people."

"King Payne gave him weapons to fight for his life. Sure Eye is trying to take him from the Seminoles, to kill him."

"Then the lad is free—he kin go where he will?" eagerly.

"No. He said that if King Payne would free him so that he could fight, he would give himself up a captive again when Sure Eye was killed."

"On parole, eh? But the gal—Blanche? She isn't?"

"She is there, in the lodge that I just come from. She has made no promises. But you—can *two* pale-faces look with kind eyes upon the same squaw, and still be good friends?" Enowilla suddenly added, her lustrous eyes fixed full upon the face of the tall scout.

"You mean to ax whether I'm sweet on Miss Blanche? No, I ain't. She's fer my betters. The lad yonder is her sweetheart. They're begaged, I think they call it. As for me, I'm still in the market. Ontil I started on this trip, I never see'd a gal that I would have. But now—" and as if alarmed at the words that trembled upon the tip of his tongue, Pete faltered, his face blushing deeply.

"Then you have seen one whom you could love, since then?" quietly asked Enowilla, her eyes unfaltering.

"Yes—durn it, why can't I speak out! Yes I hev—an' if she'll only say the word, I'm hers for ever an' ever!" desperately blurted forth Hoffman. "But say—you will help me git Miss Blanche free?"

"Why don't you go and ask this love of yours to help you?" sharply replied the Indian maiden, turning away,

"Don't I—hain't I axed you? You're the one I meant. Thar now—git mad if you like—I couldn't help it!" and the scout's hand trembled like a leaf as he brushed the drops of perspiration from his brow.

"You are throwing dust in my eyes!" cried Enowilla, turning upon him with an angry glow in her eyes. "You laugh at me, because I am only an Indian squaw."

"I told you the truth. I love you like every thin'—an' have ever sence I saw you out thar yest'day," quietly replied Pete, not without a native dignity that set well upon him.

"You do not look like one who wears a double tongue, and yet—" hesitated Enowilla.

"And what?"

"You are a pale-face and I—I am an Indian!"

"I know that; but what's the odds? Would you be any the better ef your skin was white? I know you wouldn't be any prittier—you couldn't, ef you was to try ever so much. Then you—you ain't mad at what I said?"

"No—I don't believe I am," slowly replied Enowilla, a faint smile playing around her lips. "It may be wrong, for our people are enemies, but I don't feel toward you as I do toward all other Long-knives whom I have seen."

"Nor I don't want you to nuther! I want you to—to feel for me somethin' like I do fer you. Darn it all! whar's the use? I will speak out plain. I want you to love me like I do you—will you?" and as he uttered these words, Pete gently slipped an arm round the waist of the Indian maiden.

"I do not know—perhaps I do—for there is a strange feeling here that I never knew before," simply replied Enowilla, touching her breast. "I only know that I do not hate you—that it would kill me if my people should ever do you harm."

"Ge-thunder! you do love me! That's jest the way I feel for you—all over! But you won't take it all back ag'in—you won't git over this an' give me the shake?"

"I can never forget—but listen!"

From the village came loud yells of triumph and defiance. The first lodge of the negro quarters had taken fire. This incident served to recall the lovers—for such they might indeed be called, abrupt and whimsical as had been this courtship—to a sense of their situation. Though, now that the ice was fairly broken, Pete would fain have said something more, in hopes of gaining a more definite answer from Enowilla, he had sense enough to see that the present was not the proper time.

"You will help me, then? I cain't go back on my fri'nds, ye know. It's Blanche will be the most trouble, becalse she cain't help herself much."

"If I can, I will help her to escape. She is too tender a flower to bloom long in a Seminole's lodge. She would fade away and die. And King Payne says she must be his squaw. He will be very angry, when he finds that Enowilla, his only child, has turned against him. Yet I cannot say no—you make me do just as you wish—I cannot understand it—you must be

great medicine!" said Enowilla, her breath coming quick and brokenly.

"You'll understand it in time, little 'un—never fear. An' ef I'm 'medicine,' be sure to you I'll be good medicine. But thar—you'd better go. They may miss you. I'll go back to the tree from whar I signed to you."

Left-Handed Pete threw out his long arms and drew Enowilla closely to his breast, and then pressed his lips repeatedly to hers; and this time the Indian maiden did not shrink back, nor attempt to flee. Instead her warm lithe form pressed closer to his, and her arms clung tightly around his neck. For a moment thus; then Enowilla parted the bushes and glided rapidly back to the village, while the scout returned to his observatory in the tree-top.

From there he saw the lodges in that quarter occupied by Daniel McGirth and his men, catch fire one by one from the blazing arrows that hurtled so thickly from across the water-ditch. And he knew that the crisis was near at hand—that soon the rival factions would be face to face, hand to hand in a duel that would end only in the defeat of one or the other. His blood thrilled in every vein, his eyes sparkled, his breath came fast and hot, and he longed to be able to take part in the coming *melee*.

It came. With wild yells the renegade's party darted toward their foes. A volley greeted them. The dead and dying strewed the ground. And then King Payne cheered on his braves, and the struggle became hand to hand.

That was all Left-Handed Pete saw of the affair, for his attention was drawn aside. He saw the braves who had been guarding the lodges from which Enowilla had issued, dart forward as though to join their struggling comrades. And at nearly the same moment two figures emerged from the lodge. They were women—and one of them Hoffman instantly recognized as the chief's daughter. The other—who could it be but the captive, Blanche Forrester? Though she was enveloped in the ample folds of an Indian blanket, Pete believed he recognized her form.

Scrambling down the tree he hastened to the edge of the clearing, just in time to meet them. With a cry of joy Blanche sunk into his arms, half-fainting, weak from anxiety and excitement.

"No time to talk—mus' git 'way plenty quick—dey soon find out us gone," hurriedly uttered Enowilla, speaking in her broken English, for Blanche's benefit.

"But Harry—Mr. Vories?" faltered the maiden.

"You fust, Miss Blanche—then him. He cain't go until he gives back his parole, anyhow."

"You are waiting precious moments—come! I will show you a hiding-place. You must stay there until night. Follow me—quick!" cried Enowilla, impatiently.

Trusting her implicitly, Hoffman took Blanche by the hand and followed close upon the Indian girl's footsteps. Nimble-footed as the wild fawn, she sped on through the forest, rapidly leaving the village behind, though the thrilling sounds of

the death-struggle still came plainly to their ears. A few minutes later, the fugitives stood upon the lake shore. From its hiding-place Enowilla drew her canoe, and motioned the others to enter.

"Water leaves no trail, and keen eyes will be bunting for you. Over there you can remain until night," and she pointed out a small island standing near the center of the lake.

"Ef you think it's the best, little 'un," hesitated Pete.

"Would I try to blind you?" simply returned Enowilla.

A moment later the canoe was skimming over the lake's surface with the speed of a bird. And then it disappeared amidst the dense foliage of the island.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAKE FIGHT.

THE heart of the young scout, Harry Vories, turned faint and sick within him, as he realized that Blanche Forrester was indeed missing. In that moment he suffered the tortures of the damned.

Naturally he jumped to the conclusion that Daniel McGirth had succeeded in carrying the maiden off, while the Seminoles were engaged with his men. As his dead body was not to be found upon the ground, this belief was not so far-fetched.

King Payne heard the scout's cry, and read its meaning aright. The next moment he was beside Vories, an ominous glitter in his eye.

Stooping, he cast a swift glance around the lodge, most especially near the entrance. Then arising, he uttered a signal. An Indian—wounded nearly unto death—came staggering forward, rising from a pile of dead and dying in obedience to the voice of his chief. He alone of the guards who had been left in charge of Enowilla and Blanche replied; the others were either dead or in swift pursuit of the fleeing rebels.

"Look! the lodge is empty. Where are those I left in your charge?" sternly demanded King Payne.

In a faint voice, but without betraying any signs of fear, the wounded brave made answer. He and his comrades had not been forgetful in their trust, but Enowilla, the chieftain's daughter, had set them at defiance. Once during the skirmish she had darted away to the edge of the forest, and in such a manner that nothing short of violence could have restrained her. Then when the fight became hand to hand, she ordered the braves to go and aid their brethren, saying that she would guard the pale Lily. They had obeyed, seeing that the reinforcement might turn the scale in the Seminoles' favor.

The savage ceased and stood before his chief, his head bowed as though in readiness to receive whatever punishment his disobedience might deserve. But King Payne did not raise a weapon. He felt that, under similar circumstances he would have done the same.

At this moment an old woman who had crept near enough to overhear the brave's explanation, came forward and hastily uttered a few words that changed the angry scowl of the chief to an eager look.

From her lodge, she had seen Enowilla, immediately after the guards departed, leave the lodge in company with another squaw. Since only the two occupied that lodge, the second figure could only be that of the pale-face captive. She watched them until they vanished at the forest edge; then her whole attention was turned upon the desperately struggling factions.

Side by side, King Payne and Harry Vories gained the edge of the forest, and there before them lay the plainly-imprinted trail of the two maidens. A few yards further on, and a third set of tracks joined

them. With a little cry, Vories dropped upon his knees, and closely, eagerly scrutinized this.

The footprint was one familiar to him from childhood, yet he could scarce believe his eyes. For days past he had believed Left-Handed Pete dead—devoured by the alligator of the Black Bayou. Yet here was his trail, fresh and distinct, made within the hour.

King Payne had not overlooked the young man's cry of surprise, and when he saw that the trails quietly joined each other, there having been no hesitation or resistance on the part of the women, he closely scrutinized the tracks. The larger footprint, though made by a moccasin, was unmistakably that of a white man.

"You know this trail—it was made by a friend of yours!" he uttered, quietly, though with an ominous glitter in his eyes, as he turned to Harry Vories.

"I thought I did—but the blackimps of the renegade said that he was dead—that they saw the alligator tear him to pieces," slowly replied the young scout.

"Who was he—how do you call him?"

"Left-Handed Pete—Double-Knife, I believe your people call him," said Harry, after a moment's doubt.

"I know—he is a big brave. I have said I would take his scalp, for he has killed many of my braves. But what is the child of a chief doing with him? Why did she not drive her knife to his heart? The air is thick with dust—I can not see through it!" muttered King Payne, half to himself.

Vories was no less puzzled, for Enowilla had had no opportunity of telling him of the meeting with his brother scout, owing to the trouble arising between the rival factions. Yet, with implicit confidence in Hoffman, he made answer:

"The cloud is around my eyes, too, chief; but of this you may be sure; your daughter is as safe in the company of my friend as she would be in your own lodge. He is a man, and does not make war upon women."

"He is like an owl in the daytime. He is blind, and cannot see his danger. He is tired of life, and begs me to take his scalp. Ugh! it is good!"

King Payne uttered these sentences as he glided forward along the trail, seemingly forgetting the presence of Vories. For a moment the young man hesitated, one hand dropping to the knife-hilt at his waist. He was alone with the chief, though other Seminoles were close at hand. A single stroke of the keen blade would relieve him of his bonds. And then, too, it might insure the escape of Blanche, his beloved. For that this was the purpose of Left-Handed Pete, Harry could not doubt.

"No—he has trusted me, and then my pledge—I can not do it!" Vories muttered. "But I'll follow him, and should he overtake Pete, I may be able to save his life."

With this resolve, the scout kept close upon the heels of King Payne, but offering him no aid in picking up the trail. Indeed he hoped that this would soon be lost; the shades of evening were rapidly approaching, and in the darkness, Hoffman could easily escape with Blanche.

As they proceeded along the plainly-defined trail, one by one the Seminoles joined them, until the party numbered a full dozen. In no little anxiety of mind, Vories watched them lift the trail on a rapid walk. With each moment they expected to hear the yell of discovery.

"Double-Knife has gone to lose his scalp, one of the Seminoles observed, as the trail ran along the lake-shore. "He is a white fox, but we shall trap him this time, and give his scalp to our squaws."

The last words were drowned by a single rifle-report, and a spout of flame-tinted smoke burst out of the undergrowth, just before the chief, and with a stifled cry, Harry Vories flung up his arms and fell heavily backward.

A hoarse shout of vindictive exultation followed.

and then the sounds of rapidly-retreating footsteps told that the man who had discharged the treacherous shot was in full flight.

"Sure Eye!" yelled King Payne, tearing through the bushes in hot pursuit.

"Sure Eye!" yelled the Seminoles, following close upon the footsteps of their chief.

"*Crack—crack—twang—twang!*"

The sharp report of rifles, the twanging of taut bowstrings, as the leaden and feathered missiles tore through their close-crowded ranks, caused the Seminoles to falter and then fall back, leaving several of their number lying dead upon the ground. And from the dense undergrowth beyond came the wild war-cry of the renegade McGirth and his black warriors.

Only for a moment did King Payne hesitate. Then with his stentorian charging-cry, he leaped boldly forward. Never yet had the Seminoles refused to follow that man, nor did they fail now. And yet, when they tore through the bushes and stood upon the spot from whence the ambushed shots had been sped, no living foe confronted them. They had vanished like magic.

But then the keen-eared chief distinguished the sound of retreating footfalls, and knew that the enemy had fled from the spot immediately upon discharging the volley. A single instant of listening determined the direction they were taking, and cheering on his braves, King Payne dashed forward with renewed vigor and determination. For the moment, he forgot his daughter and the escaped pale-face; he only remembered that Sure Eye was near, and that the renegade had dared to brave *his* might—to bid defiance to the King of the Seminoles.

A deep, hoarse cry—almost bellow—of rage and chagrin broke from King Payne's lips as he bounded out upon the lake-shore. The enemy was before his eyes, yet his outstretched hand could not reach him.

Crowded into a large dug-out was Daniel McGirth and six others; two giant Creeks—the rest negroes. Though overloaded, and possessing only two paddles, the canoe was rapidly leaving the shore.

As King Payne sprung out in full view, McGirth uttered a cry of taunting defiance, as he hastily rammed home a bullet. Seated near the middle of the dug-out, he muttered a few words of instruction to the paddlers, as he carefully primed his rifle.

In obedience, they ceased their strenuous efforts, and sat motionless as statues. Between their heads McGirth leveled his rifle, the gleaming drop covering the temple of King Payne, who was seemingly too greatly excited to notice his peril.

Venomously the eyes of the renegade glittered as his finger pressed the trigger. With implicit confidence in his own skill, he already triumphed in the death of the giant chief.

The weapon spoke, and King Payne swayed quickly to one side. The two Creek warriors raised their voices in triumphant yells, for, even at that distance, they could see the bright red blood gush over the face of King Payne.

But a bitter curse broke from the renegade's lips, horrible in its intensity. Just as his finger contracted upon the trigger, the form of a tall man staggered out into the open; the dress, no less than the blood-stained face, told McGirth who this was. He recognized Harry Vories, the young scout—the hated enemy whom he had thought was lying still and stark in the forest shades with a bullet-pierced brain.

To this abrupt and unexpected appearance, beyond a doubt, King Payne owed his life. The renegade, catching sight of the scout almost directly behind the Seminole chief, had started convulsively, his rifle shaking. And instead of piercing his brain, the leaden missile merely tore through the right cheek of King Payne, inflicting a painful but not dangerous wound.

Ejecting the blood that filled his mouth, King Payne thundered forth a hasty command, and instantly his braves scattered along the shores of Lake

Pithlachocco. McGirth also comprehended the order, and signed to his men to resume their paddles.

King Payne had not given his orders blindly. He knew that the lake shore was fairly lined with canoes, both large and small. It was to unearth these that he dispatched his men.

Several quick yells gave token that the Seminoles' search had not been in vain, and at almost the same instant a canoe was launched upon either hand of the point where King Payne stood. Rushing to the nearest one, the chief entered and seized a paddle. Then like a bird of life the bark canoe shot out into the lake.

Harry Vories staggered to his feet, dashing the blood from his eyes, and called aloud to the chief to admit him, but the summons was unheeded. Then, faint from loss of blood, his head throbbing as though it would split in twain, the scout sunk down upon the ground, watching the chase with eager interest.

It speedily became evident that the fugitive canoe must be overtaken long before it gained the further shore, since the pursuing boats, less heavily laden, and supplied with more paddles, made at least three feet to the renegade's one. His lead was speedily being reduced, until the boats formed the points of a right-angled triangle.

Suddenly the prow of McGirth's canoe was veered toward the left, though by that maneuver King Payne's canoe was brought considerably closer than before. And thus the form of Sure Eye was revealed kneeling in the center of the dug-out, his rifle raised, ready for firing.

King Payne knew well that his body would be the first target aimed at, and keenly eyed the marksman, though without relaxing his efforts in the least. As he was kneeling in the boat, this position gave him complete control of the canoe, and though knowing the expertness of McGirth, he believed that he would escape the shot.

Nor did he overrate his skill, for when the smoke puffed from the leveled rifle, King Payne bent his head, and with one powerful sweep of the paddle, threw the canoe slightly from its course. Though he heard the vicious *hum* of the ragged bullet past his ear, so close that one of the leaden circlets was torn from the pierced cartilage, he remained unharmed.

Uttering a fierce curse of baffled revenge, McGirth caught up a second rifle and leveled it. But this time his aim was not at King Payne, and though the chief followed the same ruse that had succeeded so well before, the bullet claimed a victim. One of the paddlers leaped erect with a horrible yell of death-agony, and toppled over into the water, almost upsetting the canoe, carrying with him the paddle.

Brief as was the delay occasioned by this incident, it was proved to the utmost by the fugitives. Yet their danger was imminent. The two canoes were now within fifty yards of them. A little to the right of the prow of the leading boat was a small, densely-wooded island, covered with scrubby trees, bushes and vines that extended to the very edge of the water. By maintaining a direct course, the fugitives would pass by this island, within a score yards.

McGirth had abandoned the discharged rifles, and now caught up a strung bow, fitting a feathered shaft to the string. With a musical *twang* the missile was loosed, and quivered in the bow of King Payne's craft. Another and another quickly succeeded, discharged first at one canoe, then at the other, and in as many seconds, three of the Seminoles were dead or disabled, thus greatly retarding their craft.

Yet, despite all this, it was plain that the fugitives must be overtaken before the lake was crossed. McGirth realized this full well, and had decided upon his course. Seeing that the Creek brave had finished loading one rifle, he gave the word, and instantly the prow of the dug-out was turned toward the now near island. Here the renegade had resolved to

make a last stand, and sell his life as dearly as possible, feeling assured that escape was out of the question. A deadly, venomous glitter filled his eyes as he clutched the freshly-loaded rifle. At least King Payne should never live to triumph over his fall.

At that moment, when the dug-out was scarce a dozen yards from land, and their intention could no longer be doubted, a rifle report broke upon the air, and uttering the never-failing death-shriek, the forward Creek fell back against the second paddler, a rifle-bullet buried in his brain. The fugitives were petrified with astonishment and dismay, at this new and unexpected danger. And, too, filled with wonder, scarce knowing whether this ambushed marksman was friend or foe, the Seminoles ceased their paddling, watching the island with widely-distended eyes.

From out the bushes, above which the smoke-wreath hung, a rapidly-succeeding chain of arrows followed, aimed by a strong hand and unerring eye. A negro fell first, a feathered shaft transfixing his throat. And the next moment the second Creek shared his fate.

Maddened, uttering a furious curse, the renegade seized a paddle, and with Herculean strength, impelled the dug-out toward the island. And, as he did so, the last of his comrades, the terrified negro, fell across his brothers, mortally wounded.

Catching up his rifle, the renegade rose to his feet, and made a mighty bound into the air. An arrow passed through his shoulder, but he alighted fairly upon the edge of the island.

Scarcely had his moccasins touched the ground than he seemed met by a flash of silver lightning. A long knife shot through the air, its blade burying itself to the hilt in McGirth's throat.

Convulsively he plucked the weapon from its quivering sheath, and raised it above his head. He strove to utter his war-cry, but the sounds died away in his throat, drowned in the flood of blood that gushed from the ghastly wound. And then he fell heavily forward. One convulsive quiver—then the strong limbs of the renegade were straightened in the embrace of death.

And through all this, not a glimpse betrayed who the hidden marksman was. Only the rifle-shot and the death-dealing arrow evinced the presence there of any mortal being.

In amazement the Seminoles watched the tragic end of the canoe race. So swiftly had the missiles followed each other, that one death was scarce realized, ere another followed. It seemed the work of more than mortal man, or else the island contained no contemptible force.

But their surmises were quickly terminated by sight of a single canoe, as it boldly swept out from behind the island, heading toward the shore. It contained three figures, distinctly visible in the red glare of the setting sun; one man and two women. The man and one woman were rapidly plying the paddles, and the frail barque sped over the tranquil surface with the speed and grace of the summer swallow.

A yell of rage broke from King Payne's lips. He recognized his daughter, Enowilla, fleeing from him in company with the hated and feared Double-King. And then began another race, every man straining to the utmost his prowess; but the fugitives held their vantage.

Already half the distance to the shore was crossed, when suddenly the canoe of the fugitives turned to the right. A yell from in front told why this was done. Two canoes filled with savages shot out from the land.

The Seminoles now felt assured of success. Long before the fugitives could gain the shelter of the forest, they would be overtaken, for every stroke of the paddles lessened the distance between the three parties.

Yet Double-Knife and Enowilla increased their

exertions, until their flashing paddles could no longer be distinguished, so rapidly were they handled. The light canoe seemed to skim over the surface, scarce touching the water. Even the most revengeful of the Seminoles could not restrain a feeling of admiration at the skill displayed by their hated enemy. It was, indeed, little short of marvelous.

Let the pursuers paddle as they might, they now saw that the canoes would touch shore at almost the same instant, if, indeed, the fugitives did not beat them. Twenty seconds later, the Indian canoes came together, but the fugitives had slipped between trees, and were now in the edge of the shadow, fifty yards ahead. Then the canoe vanished.

Leaping from the canoe before it touched shore, King Payne found himself standing beside Enowilla and Blanche. But Double-knife was gone. He had vanished like magic.

Fairly frothing at the mouth, the chieftain raised his hatchet above his daughter's head. Enowilla did not shrink or tremble, but calmly bowed her head to meet the stroke.

With a low, gasping cry of terror and apprehension, Blanche Forrester sprung forward, and drew Enowilla back, shielding her form with her own.

"You must kill me first!" she cried, flinging up one hand, as though she would thus avert the quivering blade.

At that moment a strong hand drove back the chieftain's arm, and wrenched the tomahawk from his grasp, hurling it far out into the lake. With a snarl of rage, King Payne turned, his eyes flashing fire. Even through the fast gathering gloom, he distinguished the stern lineaments of a white man.

CHAPTER X.

A COMPLICATED SITUATION.

"You shall not murder them while I can lift an arm in their defense!" cried Harry Vories, as he hurled the chief's hatchet far away.

A deep cry, almost bellow of fury broke from King Payne's lips as he recognized the one whose hand had so boldly frustrated his just vengeance, and then his long, muscular arms were flung out, and the white scout was enveloped in an embrace scarcely less deadly and crushing than that of a bear. Fortunate indeed was it that King Payne had no weapons, else the young ranger would have fallen dead at the feet of those whom he had dared so much to save.

As it was, Vories did not attempt to use his weapons, fortunately remembering his situation enough to know that in such a case the infuriated Seminoles would cut him to pieces the next moment. But, grappling with the chief, he put every muscle and particle of skill into play. Back and forth they rushed and tottered, panting, straining, breathing with difficulty, so tightly were the suffocating arms wound round each other.

Around them stood the Seminoles, all of them now landed from their canoes. Though each right hand clutched the haft of either tomahawk or knife, not a brave offered to interfere, but watched the struggle with breathless interest.

An instant's pause, as if for breath, then the struggle was renewed with redoubled vigor. The pale-face was raised fairly from the ground, but in vain King Payne endeavored to cast his antagonist from him. The lithe limbs of the scout clung to the bronzed Hercules, even as the ivy clings to the gnarled and twisted elm.

Again they stood with both feet upon the ground, breast to breast, but King Payne is panting heavily, his breath almost gone, so fierce had been his last struggle. Then quick as thought came the change. Cool and collected Vories had patiently waited his chance; and now it was come.

With sudden fury he pressed heavily against the chief, as though intending to bear him backward to the ground by main strength. The Seminole fell into the trap. Summoning all his power he resisted

the pressure. Suddenly changing his grip, Vories stooped low, and aided by the forward movement of King Payne, flung the chief heavily over his head.

Yelling madly, the Seminole braves drew still closer, encircling the young scout, their knives and tomahawks glittering above their heads. Even in the moment of victory, death threatened him blackly.

Blanche Forrester shrieked aloud with horror, and strove to press through the savage cordon, to share the fate of her lover; but the arms of Enowilla restrained her. Vories did not flinch. He boldly eyes the menacing weapons, then drew his form erect, folding his arms as though defying the death-stroke. A less cool man would have attempted to draw a weapon to defend himself, and thus have sealed his own fate; but not so our hero. He knew that such an action could only end in one way; and that way his death.

His calm defiance served its purpose. The Seminoles involuntarily hesitated, and the next moment a loud cry caused them to fall back, every weapon dropping to their sides. It was the voice of King Payne.

Half stunned, he had arisen from the ground in which his head and shoulders had been half buried, and brushing the dirt from his eyes, took in the scene at a single glance. Thus he uttered the command that caused his braves to fall back, and saved the young scout's life, for the moment, at least.

Stepping before Vories, King Payne eyed him for a moment in silence. Then extending a hand, he said:

"You should be a Seminole, and they would call you Bending Oak. My heart would be very glad to have such a son. You have conquered a chief."

"I only wanted to save you from doing that for which your heart would weep tears of blood, an hour from now. You would have murdered your own child; and I could not stand by and see that, quietly," simply replied Vories.

"It would have been justice—nothing more; for she had joined with Double-Knife against her people."

"Did Double-Knife shoot at your people? Did he not kill the White Snake and his braves?" quickly added Vories, who had been in one of the canoes, and near enough to see what had occurred at the island. "True, he tried to rescue the white maiden, but she is his friend, and you can not blame him for that. He had no hard feeling against you, or your tribe. He will be your friend, and help fight your enemies—all that are not of his own people—if you wish it. I can call him up here, if you promise that he shall not be injured. Promise me that, by the bones of your fathers, and I will call him here," eagerly said Harry.

"No, I will not promise. His hands are red with the blood of the Seminole. Our lodges are darkened because the braves who went forth from them, met Double-Knife upon the trail, and never returned. He is a brave—but he must die," sternly replied King Payne, at the same time giving his warriors a signal that they immediately obeyed by darting away through the gloomy forest.

Vories knew that they had gone in pursuit of Left-Handed Pete, but he felt little anxiety as to the result, knowing well how cunning and skillful his comrade was.

In a few short words, King Payne ordered Enowilla to return to Cuscorilla, and then motioned Vories to follow him. Again the scout was sorely tempted to trust all to one swift, deadly blow, now that his loved one was beside him. It seemed so easy to gain freedom once more; and yet he could not deal the treacherous blow from behind, while King Payne so implicitly trusted in his honor. Had the chief shown the slightest degree of suspicion, the result might have been different. But he slowly walked away, simply bidding Vories follow him with Blanche.

When the village was reached, King Payne shut Enowilla and Blanche up in one of the lodges, then signed Vories to follow him. In silence the scout obeyed, and a few moments later they were seated in King Payne's own lodge, quietly smoking their pipes, as though the chain of thrilling and tragic events had been purely imaginary, rather than stern reality.

The chief was the first to break the silence. Now that he was alone with the scout, he more than ever resembled a white man in his words and manner. It was only when with his braves that he affected the purely Indian style. He had spent so much of his life among the pale-faces that their language and habits seemed more familiar to him than those of his own people. Through the smoke that curled thickly around his head, King Payne narrowly watched the effect of his words upon Harry Vories.

"Life is sweet to the young. It is hard to die while the veins are full of hot blood. Even a warrior may long to live, and make a sacrifice to save his life. What would you give for life and liberty?"

"Life I love, and liberty I could have gained a dozen times to-day, but I would not break my word of honor to obtain it," quietly replied Vories.

"What is honor? A little word—a mouthful of air; nothing more," contemptuously uttered the chief.

"Little as it is, chief, it has saved your life at least twice since the morning sun rose. Your back was turned to me, and my hand touched the haft of my knife. By drawing it and making one strong blow, I could have been free. But I had pledged my word that I would not attempt to escape until you had taken back my parole."

"You would have been wiser had you dealt the blow, and over my dead body, reached freedom. But you did not—you let the chance slip by you, and now you are still in my power—my captive, whose death I can decree by one word. Yet, on one condition I will give you your life and freedom."

"What is that condition?" asked Vories with ill-concealed eagerness.

"You saved Enowilla from my hatchet; why did you do that?"

"Because she was a woman, and I would not see a father's hand stained with the blood of his child," was the prompt reply.

"If you say so, she shall live, though her actions deserve death. But there is one condition. Remember, you are deciding, also, whether you shall live or die. If you accept, you are both safe; if you refuse, you shall both die."

"What is the condition? Are we squaws, that so many words are needed?" impatiently demanded the white scout.

"Your words are good. Listen, then, and do not decide without thought. First, you must promise to change your color—to become my son, and a Seminole by adoption. You must be one of us, fight our enemies and be friend of our friends. And to make the adoption complete, you must take a squaw from our people. There are many to choose from; but if Enowilla does not find favor in your eyes, she must die!"

For a moment Harry Vories was speechless with surprise, as King Payne paused to note the effect of his coldly-uttered words. And truly he had delivered an entire broadside, that might well cause the recipient to shrink and feel the shock in every timber. But then indignation took the place of surprise, and Vories replied, his cheeks flushed, his eyes flashing:

"Are you crazy, or do you take me for a fool? If I thought you could believe that of me, even though you are a savage heathen, I'd be tempted to slap your jaws for your impudence! Still, if you want an answer, I say no!"

"That is your answer?" quietly added King Payne.

"Yes—and don't ask me any more such foolish questions. But I believe—you must be only joking?"

"Listen. It was decided in council to offer you your life on the conditions I named; if you would become a Seminole by adoption, and take a Seminole squaw, your life was to be spared. If not, you were to die. But you refuse, as I knew you would. Let the Seminoles know this, and you *must* die. Your only chance is to escape before they return. Go—I give you your life. But when we next meet, guard yourself. We will be enemies then, and the best warrior will take the other's scalp. Go."

"You bid me go, and yet you hold my heart here. Give me the pale-faced captive, and I will go. I promise never to strike another blow at the Seminoles, unless they first attack me. If you refuse, you had better take my scalp now, for I swear to kill every Indian that I set eyes upon."

"You can not have the squaw—she is for my lodge."

Vories flashed forth his knife and leaped to his feet, his eyes glowing with angry vengeance. But King Payne did not stir, nor offer to draw a weapon, calmly smoking his pipe. There was something in his cool courage that awed Harry Vories, despite himself. Even while stung to the quick by the chief's last words, he could not strike an unresisting man.

"Listen—I will buy her of you. I am rich—I have plenty of gold and horses and goods. I will give you all you ask. Name your price, and I will give it for Blanche," he cried, eagerly, almost imploringly.

"Go, while there is time," simply replied the chief, waving his hand toward the door. "I hear the Seminoles returning. Go, or stay to meet your death."

"If I do go without Blanche, it will be to return with a force that shall outnumber the very leaves of the forest. I will wipe your tribe from the face of the earth!"

"Come and welcome. There is plenty of room for your scalps in our lodges," tersely replied King Payne.

Harry Vories saw that he could not alter the resolution of the chief, and he, too, heard the sounds of returning braves. It was now too late to think of force. Even though he might succeed in killing the chief, he could not hope to escape from the camp with Blanche. The returning warriors would overtake them, and the death of both would be the result.

"I will go, but you will regret this. I offered to be your friend, but you chose my enmity. So be it! You will visit the hunting-grounds the sooner!" he uttered, in a quiet, stern tone, and then strode from the lodge.

Almost at the entrance, he encountered several warriors, returning from the pursuit of McGirth's men, and without heeding their black looks, he brushed rudely past them, heading toward the forest. For a moment it seemed as though there would be trouble. The savages paused and half-drew their weapons, as though about to seize the scout.

But there was a bold freedom in his movements that would hardly be displayed by a captive attempting to escape, and remembering his compact with their chief, they suffered Vories to pass them by unmolested.

Hastening on, Harry soon entered the forest, almost upon the trail by which King Payne had led the trio back to the village. Scarcely was Cuscorilla hidden from view, when a dark form suddenly rose before him. Vories flashed forth his knife, and crouched for a leap upon the man, but then the weapon dropped from his hand, as a well-known voice uttered:

"Is that you Harry, old boy?"

"Pete—thank God! you are alive and safe!" cried Vories, flinging his arms around the tall scout, in an ecstasy of delight.

CHAPTER XI.

SONG OF THE BLOODHOUND.

THE comrades withdrew deeper into the forest, and there conversed earnestly, carefully weighing the chances for and against the success of the bold resolve that held firm possession of their hearts. Come what might, be the result what it would, Harry Vories was determined to free Blanche from the hands of King Payne; and though the determination was not expressed in so many words, Left-Handed Pete vowed in his heart that he would not turn his back upon Cuscorilla unless Enowilla held him company.

Snugly ensconced in the dense, bushy top of a tree growing not far from the edge of the cleared tract, the two scouts in cautious whispers discussed the project, forming their plans as far as the course of events could be foreseen. By parting the leafy boughs, they could gaze out upon Cuscorilla, guided by the fires that glowed before several of the lodges, and the still-smoldering embers that marked the spot where the quarters of Daniel McGirth had so lately stood.

"You see the town is all alive—they will not think of closing their eyes this night," observed Vories.

"So much the better for us, then," returned Left-Handed Pete. "They'll be busy pow-wowin' over thar dead, an' won't be likely to notice one extry feller in the crowd. I kin go in thar, by fixin' up a leetle, an' fetch the gals out without a scratch. An' mark me; unless we git them out o' thar afore day, then good-by to 'em fer good. You say the old heathen wants Blanche fer his squaw; then he won't take his eyes off'm her ontel she is his, when enct they git kinder sorter settled down ag'in a'ter thar rumpus an' throat-cuttin'. To-night's our only chance, in my 'pinion."

"There's a good deal in what you say, Pete," thoughtfully returned Vories. "We will try it. At worst, we can only fail."

"Not we, but *me*. One kin do better than two, by hafe. You'll stay here ontel we come. Ef I git 'em free, all right. Ef not, an' the varmints grup me, do you make a bee-line fer the old neighborhood, an' pick up a wheen o' good boys to come back with ye. Anyhow you'd be in time to make the heathen, King Payne an' all, sweat blood fer what they may hev did to us."

"Let me go instead of you—I know the lodge they are—"

"You couldn't do nothin' with Enowilla; an' I won't leave this without her. You'd hev to wait ontel I went back fer her, anyhow. You know you kin trust me. I wouldn't say so unless it was fer the best," quietly replied Hoffman.

There were few words wanted, for by the time Pete should complete his preparations, 'twould be late enough for the venture. These preparations were simple enough.

He doffed his extra clothing, and descending from the tree, rubbed the exposed portion of his person with the dark mud of the neighboring bayou. A whisp of grass tied about his head completed his toilet. Rude though it was, Pete believed that his disguise was sufficient. In the gloom of night, the mud might well pass for the bronzed skin of an Indian warrior, and he didn't intend venturing within the glow of the campfire.

Harry Vories gave him all the information in his power, and Pete felt confident that he would experience no difficulty in finding the lodge which contained Enowilla and Blanche Forrester. And then, with a silent hand-clasp, the comrades parted, Hoffman gliding stealthily toward the village. But when within a hundred yards, he arose and stalked boldly forward. Even if noticed by any of the savages who were gliding to and fro, or standing in little knots, Pete believed they would have no suspicion of his identity, but would think him one of themselves.

from his upright carriage, so devoid of any attempt at concealment.

Dame Fortune still seemed to stand his friend, for he gained the rear of the lodge indicated by Vories, unmolested. With no little gratification he saw that there was no fire built before the lodge door, which was cast into deep shadow by the next house. Everything seemed to work in his favor, for, though the heavy slab door was closed and barred, there was no guard stationed there, as he had fully expected.

"It's a good sign—I don't reckon thar's goin' to be so much trouble, a'ter all," he muttered, listening intently. "The reds seem busy with thar dead; guess I'd better try it now, while thar's a show."

Gaining the door, he cast a swift yet thorough glance around. Not a living soul was to be seen, though the hum of voices came distinctly to his ear.

Cautiously, noiselessly, the scout removed the stout bar, and then gently opened the door a few inches. As he listened, he heard a faint rustling within, and a smothered exclamation in a voice that he recognized; at least Blanche Forrester was awake. Fearing that she would make some outcry and thus alarm the Seminoles, Left-Handed Pete ventured to whisper, though knowing that he ran no slight risk in so doing:

"Don't be skeered, Miss Blanche. It's a fri'nd—me, Left-Handed Pete. I've come to take you back home."

His speech suddenly ceased, for a lithe form appeared in the aperture, and in an instant his strong arms were flung around it. A faint report followed; but that was nothing more serious than a kiss. In the gloom, dense as it was, Left-Handed Pete could not mistake that figure; he knew that Enowilla had heard his call.

She did not make any outcry, as would seem natural that she should. Possibly she was growing accustomed to these audacious freaks of the tall scout.

"Where is Harry?" eagerly asked Blanche.

"Waiting for us," promptly replied Pete. "Come, let's go."

"Farewell, then. If you escape and reach your people in safety, think sometimes of the Indian girl," quietly uttered Enowilla, withdrawing herself from the scout's embrace.

"You're goin' with us," faltered Left-Handed Pete.

"King Payne is my father, though he spoke hot, angry words to me. My place is here."

"Your place is with the one you love the best? Ef you will go with us, be sure o' one thing; you shall always be well taken keer of, an' shain't want for nothin' while I live. Thar it is, short an' sweet. I love you, an' will marry you the fust preacher we find. Mebbe you kin find a smarter man, one more worthy of you; but ef you s'arch the whole world through, little 'un, you won't find one who'll love you any better, or be truer to ye than me," earnestly responded Left-Handed Pete.

"My father would curse his child," murmured Enowilla.

"That settles it, then," coolly added Pete, entering the lodge, and closing the door behind him.

"What do you mean? Every moment lost now may be your death! If any brave passes by and notices the bar down, he will give the alarm and you will be killed!"

"All right—let 'em come. I don't care," doggedly replied Pete. "You say you don't keer a snap o' the finger for me—"

"I didn't say that."

"Mounts to the same in the eend. You choose to stay here when the chief says you've got to die fer bein' a traitor to your people, rather than to go with me as my wife. That's why I'm goin' to stay here. Ef I'm so pesky or'nary that a woman would rather be killed then be my wife, I don't keer much 'bout livin' any longer."

"Go—or it will be too late! Remember that you are dooming *her* too—would you kill *her*, too?"

"I don't keer. Unless you go with us, we'll all stay an' see the show out. No use talkin'—I'm a mule when I putt my foot down."

"Come, then, I will go," desperately cried Enowilla. "They would burn you at the fire-stake, and I could not see that and live. Let them call me a traitress and heap curses upon my head—I can bear that better than to see you die."

"God bless ye, little 'un—you shell never hev cause to regret this," brokenly muttered Pete, as once more his strong arms drew the Indian maiden to his heart.

The next moment he was once more the cool, astute scout. While searching for the lodge that contained the captive maidens, he had come across the water-ditch, and he remembered this now. Through it he hoped to convey the women to the forest, unobserved. Except at one point, the ditch was enveloped in darkness; a heap of smoldering embers that marked where the lodge of Daniel McGirth had stood earlier in the day, cast a dim glow upon the ditch. That passed in safety, and there would be no further danger of being seen.

Fortune still favored the bold scout, and ten minutes later he led his charges into the forest, where in a short time Harry Vories joined them. It was a rapturous meeting, that between the two lovers, and both Pete and the chief's daughter were affected by it. At this point Enowilla wished to return, but Pete pleaded so eloquently, aided by both Blanche and Vories, that she finally yielded to her fate, never again to struggle against it.

Knowing that when the escape was discovered, pursuit instant and determined would be made, the fugitives lost no time, but pressed rapidly on through the remainder of the night. They knew that they would not be safe until fairly in the midst of their friends, for King Payne would follow them to the very door of his enemies before giving them up. And a long and weary trail lay before them, beset with no ordinary perils and privations.

After an hour's rest, the party again set forth upon their weary journey. As the women were faint and weary with such excessive exertions, their progress was more slow, and Pete improved the opportunity to lay several false scents, and to break the trail as thoroughly as he could.

At noon they halted and ventured to build a fire, by which to cook some squirrels, which Left-Handed Pete had killed with a bow and arrow, picked up at the spot where Colonel Newman and his volunteers had made such a desperate stand against the Seminoles.

Greatly refreshed by this meal, the fugitives resumed their journey. Shortly after Left-Handed Pete struck out to lay another false scent, while the others availed themselves of the waters of a bayou that lay close at hand to break their trail.

It would be tiresome to detail their journey, hour by hour, even if space permitted. During that and the succeeding day they had several narrow escapes from the savages, though these enemies appeared journeying toward Cuscorrilla instead of being in pursuit of them, which may account for their trail not being noticed.

In all this time the two scouts had not suffered themselves to close their eyes. For more than their own lives were depending on their watchfulness and skill.

It was nearly sunset of the second day. Pete, as before, was out scouting around, leaving Vories to guide the women.

Suddenly Harry paused, bending his ear, while a ghastly pallor overspread his countenance. A horrible sound came to his ears, faint and from afar off, but unmistakable.

Enowilla and Blanche also heard and recognized the sound. It was no new one to their ears, yet never before had it affected them so terribly as now.

"My God! *we are hunted by bloodhounds!*" gasped Vories.

And the deep, musical, but terrible bay of the bloodhound sounded more and more distinct.

CHAPTER XII.

A KING TO THE LAST.

"At least we will die together, dear Harry," murmured Blanche Forrester, clinging closer to Vories.

"Yes, my darling—they shall not take you from me again," the young scout breathed, an arm supporting the yielding form of the maiden.

"Is this the time to act like love-sick squaws?" half angrily cried Enowilla. "Are you tired of life that you stay here in idleness, waiting for the Seminoles?"

"What can we do? Blanche is completely exhausted. We cannot run as fast as those devil-nosed dogs can follow us. They must soon come up with us. What matters it whether I fight here or further on? The end will be the same," quietly replied Vories, yet, brave as he undeniably was, with a cadence of despair in his voice.

"You could not fight here. Before you could breathe twice, your scalp would hang at King Payne's belt. Come—I will guide you to a better spot," hurriedly added the Indian maiden.

There was no time to lose asking questions, and Harry now placed implicit confidence in Enowilla. As she glided away, he raised Blanche in his arms and followed after.

Enowilla diverged abruptly to the left, and in a very short space of time stood upon the edge of a bayou. The water was dark and noisome. The prospect was anything but cheering. Even in the gloom, more than one slimy, serrated back could be seen parting the stagnant water. It seemed the home of alligators. And yet this was the refuge Enowilla had in view.

She ran hastily along the bank, motioning Vories to follow her. With the maiden's head resting upon his shoulder, her arms around his neck, her fair face, with half-closed eyes and gently-parted lips, upturned toward his, Harry followed, more like one in a dream than sober reality. And from the black forest behind came the song of the bloodhound, guiding its scarcely less savage masters unerringly along their trail.

"There is where we must hide, and fight, if they find us," hurriedly said Enowilla, pausing. "Give me your gun and powder. I will cross first. You must carry her. But be cautious and do not splash in the water, or the evil spirit of the swamp will send the water-dogs to destroy you."

From some cause the bayou here was less densely wooded, and spread out to double its ordinary width. Near its center was a small island, densely fringed with vine-clad bushes. But to reach this, full twenty yards of black water must be crossed. And Vories shuddered as he remembered the large saurians he had noticed but a minute before. It seemed nothing short of suicide to venture in the water; yet Enowilla did not hesitate.

Holding the scout's rifle and ammunition above her head, she silently entered the water, proceeding with extreme caution. Not a sound betrayed her progress. And thus she gained the island in safety.

Vories prepared to follow her example. Bidding Blanche fear nothing, he entered the water. In the middle, it reached nearly to his armpits, the maiden's weight bearing him deep in the mud. In extricating one foot, he tripped and sunk beneath the water with a sudden splash, yet ever mindful of the welfare of her he so devotedly loved, the scout held Blanche's head above the noisome water.

"Quick! or you are lost!" cried Enowilla, as the rifle sprung to her shoulder.

Vories glanced over his shoulder, half-blinded by the water. He indistinctly caught a glimpse of an alligator darting toward him, with widely-distended jaws. His heart turned faint with a sickening dread, not for himself, but for Blanche. Still he pressed forward as rapidly as possible.

He heard a sharp report—a violent splashing behind him, then a heavy stroke hurled him upon the edge of the island half-stunned.

The quick eye and ready hand of Enowilla had saved him. She sent a bullet down the yawning throat of the alligator, and stung with the pain, the reptile whirled around its massive tail, sweeping the scout and Blanche to the island's edge.

Yet it seemed as though the rifle-shot, in saving them from one death, had doomed them to a scarcely less certain destruction. From the forest beyond, the wild, triumphant yell of the Seminole rose clear and distinct, even above the terrible music of the bloodhound's song. Following upon the fresh trail, they knew that the report came from the fugitives. And the next minute they were gathered, a score in number, upon the bank of the bayou.

The muddy water, the torn and trampled mud upon the island's edge, but too plainly revealed the retreat of the fugitives. Yet the Seminoles did not advance; they dare not. The bayou was almost alive with alligators, drawn thither by the noise, the splashing of their wounded fellow, and the scent of the blood. To venture into the water then would be instant death.

The Seminoles yelled madly in their disappointment, and several rifle-balls and arrows were sent into the bushes that concealed the fugitives, before King Payne could hinder. He did interfere, but not from motives of mercy. He had spoken the doom of the fugitives. They must die—and at the stake!

The quick strokes of hatchets filled the forest. Vories sternly clinched his teeth and prepared for the end. He knew that the savages were building a raft upon which they might reach the island in spite of the alligators.

Suddenly he started, a wild light filling his eyes. The cause was plain. The forest beyond was filled with the report of rifles and pistols, and loud cheers and fierce yell of battle. And above all he could distinguish the shrill war-cry of Left-Handed Pete!

"Thank God! we are saved!" he muttered, clasping Blanche to his breast.

He was right in this. Half an hour later the cheery voice of Pete Hoffman hailed them, and then the raft was pushed across the bayou, and the friends were visited. In answer to Enowilla, Pete said that King Payne had fallen, fighting bravely, but not by his hand. She asked to be shown his body. In silence Pete complied with her request.

To his surprise, the chief was found alive, though fast sinking. Even through the gathering gloom, King Payne recognized his daughter. But before she could utter a word, he made a rapid motion; then his head fell back. He had driven his knife deep into his own heart.

A king he lived; a king he died.

There remains little to add. The Seminoles under Billy Bowlegs had been defeated in their foray, and retreating, had been hotly pursued by the whites. Falling in with these, Left-Handed Pete had induced them to aid his friend. The result is recorded.

Of course Blanche and Harry were married; and equally of course Enowilla rewarded Left-Handed Pete.

The remainder may safely be left to the reader's imagination.

THE END.

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 98 William Street, New York.